

## IT, chapter three by falteringstar (allonsysouffle)

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**Summary:**

“This is gonna sound so stupid, Bev.”

“Oh, coming from you.”

“You’re not gonna believe me.”

“We’ve done a lot of things we don’t really believe.”

Time’s a flat circle. Someone’s torn a hole right through it. Lucky.

AKA: a technically canon-compliant time travel threequel, featuring a cross-country road trip, the power of friendship, my own gay rage, erotic dishwashing, and an extremely generous definition of what exactly a deadlight is. (look, it’ll make more sense than chapter two did, and that’s a promise.)



# 1. PART ONE: i'm sitting waiting for my deus ex machina!

## Notes for the Chapter:

PRELUDE: I wanted to right some wrongs; I wanted a movie very much like the other movies but altogether a different thing; I wanted to subtract the clown; I wanted something that felt bigger than itself, bigger than a little town in Maine. Sometimes terrible things happen to ordinary people. Sometimes those things don't have to be so terrible. I wanted to reassign the role of protagonist to the characters who actually deserved it. I wanted to jump sharks, and get pretentious, and fix this whole damn rotten mess.

And I wanted to give Richie his life back. It just didn't seem fair, you know?

## I. 2017 - Chicago

It all feels so still. Everything, all of it. Like, as if life has really *always* been like this, only it can't have. Richie's drought-spotted plants rustle quietly on the windowsill, breathing shallow green breaths as if to say, how silly it must be, to dream of dying earlier than your body would like. When the wind's up they sound like they're laughing—never cruelly, but sweet and sad, saying, honey, don't sleep so deeply tonight. Eat, be full, take up space. Clean the bathroom.

Maybe it isn't so much that Richie wants to die, or that he's given up, that there's nothing left for him west of the Styx. Because it isn't that, there's a glimmer of hope somewhere in some useless part of him, still gleaming on the wing. It's probably Stan, he thinks sometimes—the glimmer— a kind smile, a little help from a friend, *be proud*— then he thinks of how rude it must be to use another person's life as fuel for your own pathetic, self-imposed narrative. And a dead life, at that.

He thinks a lot these days.

Some magazine somewhere had emailed a few months ago to ask him why he'd quit comedy. They had other questions, but he'd only answered that one, and only quickly, before he could stop himself. *I deserve a private life, he'd said, don't you think? and, I experienced a personal tragedy eight months ago, and, I've moved on from that sort of scene, and, I'd love to come back someday, only I can't think of anything funnier than how sad I am. No, really, it's hilarious how insufferable I get. I laugh a lot nowadays, but it sounds all guilty.*

It was never published, but it's true, Richie does laugh a lot, when he's not so stuck in his head. He laughs at nothing, often, or at very small things that don't make any sense. Not a lot of things make sense. It's funny how the pizza guy only recognizes him from that mercurially embarrassing Bud Light commercial he did six years ago. It's funny that his apartment walls are so thin he once heard his neighbours complaining over a rerun of one of Bill's bad movies, agonizing about plot inconsistencies. It's funny how his houseplants like to berate him for rotting away in bed when they're the ones with leaves all full of holes, the green bastards. He's scared of holes, too, now—snips away at every bug-eaten bud, throws away every sock that's torn in the big toe, thinks twice when reaching for the salt-shaker. Holes make him think too much, it's hard to laugh at holes.

"You just need time," Ben says over the phone in late January, not unkindly. "I know that sounds cliché, or stupid. Maybe it is, I dunno."

"It is." He tries not to sound gruff about it.

"Well, I'm sorry." Ben clicks his tongue. "Just— just keep breathing, man, we can't give up on ourselves, not after all that. We're *all* still fucked up, of course we are. How can we not be? But if we keep breathing... we can prove that it was worth it." There's a hanging, knowing quiet. *Worth it*, Richie thinks bitterly, *the fuck could you possibly know about 'worth it'?* "All I can say, Richie. That's all I've got. Just... I don't know, keep going. We're always here if you need us. Okay? It's all gonna be okay in the end."

A pause. "Bev there?"

"Oh, shit, sorry. She's at therapy."

“That’s okay, man.”

“Breathe, alright? Alright.”

“Thanks, Ben. For that. Thank you.” He tries to think of some joke to lighten it all up but he reckons he’s lost his touch, so he hangs up and sits there, just sits. Maybe he should go to therapy. He won’t, but he still thinks about it.

It’s not that breathing’s the hard thing, for him. Mostly thinking about his own breathing makes him nauseous. Bill tried to get him to learn to meditate once, said it helped him when the words wouldn’t come. Richie can’t seem to *stop* the words from coming, though, and really counting breaths just makes him think of inhalers. So stop thinking, murmur the plants, you know you can’t go back.

“Fuck off,” he says into his palms when he hears them, then, “I should’ve gotten you assholes in plastic.”

He thinks about texting– no, never mind. He texts Bev instead, just a smiley face and a “hope you’re well, ringwald.” She sends back a picture of their huge, shaggy dog, and then one more of her and Ben pulling funny faces, and then, “You too, tiger!!”

And, god, for a horrible moment Richie can’t see anything, just the red of the back of his eyelids. It’s like his blood is blistering under his skin. He can’t even breathe, why can’t he breathe? Nothing about anything feels right anymore, it shouldn’t be like this, they shouldn’t get to be so happy, rich and pretty and so fucking *happy*, he hates that they’re so *nice* to him. It isn’t that they pity him, or anything, it isn’t that he’s jealous, that they’re cruel or braggarts or anything. They’re the nicest people he’s ever met.

But there’s a hole in him. It isn’t their fault, and doesn’t that just make him feel so much fucking worse.

When it happened, it’s like their lives all clicked into place, but his got stuck somewhere, maybe too long ago, caught in a closing door. The rest– the ones who survived– all got to be happy, got to feel whole and centred. Not just alive, but living, and living happily. Ben even bought a sailboat. He’s scared of his salt-shaker. He talks to

plants.

It's very late that night when he shakes out the sleeping pills onto the kitchen table and drains the last of his second beer— a Bud Light, now that's gotta be a little funny. He doesn't take a lot of pills these days, stopped picking up his prescriptions a while ago. Everything always reminds him of everything else.

Too bad, he reckons, maybe just this once he can deal with it, touch just the edge of the raw of the wound. He swallows one pill, and swallows again, and breathes, and counts his breath. He's not trying to die, he really isn't. He just doesn't want to be awake for a good long while.

And hey, maybe if he takes enough he won't dream tonight.

For a strange half-second, it seems a lot like the sky's falling.

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## II. 2002 - A suburb of Portland

Beverly Marsh wakes up to the sound of crashing, and her whole body seizes.

*Don't be stupid.* It's July and the basement suite is sweltering in the mid-morning. The noise came from outside, and honestly from what she can hear it sounds more like a racoon than anyone's vengeful spirit. *Nobody's come to kill you. Get up.*

There aren't any windows set into the pea-green walls so she drags herself out of bed and walks barefoot to the front door, peering out of the keyhole. She's glad the family living in the house upstairs is out on vacation, they'd kill her if she forgot to lock up the garbage cans properly again.

No raccoon. *Maybe it got away*, she muses. She'd like that better, honestly, *poor thing's probably starving anyway*. She can still hear scuffling, though. She pushes the door open with a grumble and

comes face to face with a familiar ghost.

Richie Tozier is gangly and shaped like a stick-bug, but it's hard to discern that when he's flat on the parched grass of the porch, heaving for air, head whipping back and forth, so frantic it's almost funny.

"This can't be fucking happening, this has– this has to be some kind of stupid dream, please tell me this is a stupid– *HOLY SHIT, BEV?*" He locks eyes with her and she swears he looks rabid. She can only stare.

He gets up and looks down at himself, and freezes. Terror in those big brown eyes. "Well, Christ, that's new. Old. Okay. Uh. Not okay. No, no, no, no, no, NO, fuck this, no, this isn't *real*." He looks at her again. "Ha, great joke, you fucking *clown*, *cool*, y'know, I always wanted to relive my prime. Yeah, I get it now, you're not real, are you? Yeah, she's for sure a goddamn deepfake, oh this is some sick fucking hallucination bullshit, I'm dying, aren't I. Shit, *shit*, I am not going gently or whatever the fuck, I can't deal with this *SHIT* right now." He's slapping his face. "God *damn* it, wake up."

"Richie?" She can't stop staring. Something horrible is flooding back into her veins. She feels very cold. "Richie, why are you... why are you on my *porch*? What's going on?"

"Why are you in my dream?" he demands, then falters. "Fucking, god, you look like a goddamn American Doll. You look fresh out of– out of *middle school*. There's no way– *I* look like– Oh Christ, I look like an overgrown *baby*–"

"This... isn't a dream, Richie," she interrupts, hollow. She hasn't seen Richie Tozier in thirteen years. She'd forgotten he'd existed– how could she have possibly forgotten? "This is real. I'm not gonna pinch you, but you're not dreaming– I mean, I'm pretty sure."

His eyebrows furrow and his arms drop to his sides. "Jesus. Oh Jesus Christ. What– what year is it?"

*So there's something seriously wrong, okay.* "What kind of question is that, Rich?" she asks from the door, still unconvinced *he's* not some vision. "Is everything okay? Are you– jeez, are you hurt, do you want me to call someone?"

“What fucking *year* is it?” He looks so desperate. Haggard, like his eyes are older than he is. He didn’t use to look like that.

She comes fully out of the doorframe, closes it behind her, and sits on the front step. “It’s 2002, Richie. Remember? Now can you sit down next to me? Please?”

He does, gingerly, like somehow he doesn’t know how to operate his limbs quite right. “And we’re... I guess twenty-six. Right? That seems right.”

“I dunno, what’s your birthday?” She’s trying to keep things light, but she searches his eyes, are his pupils dilated? Does his breath smell like spirits?

“Twenty-six. Okay. Okay, I’m twenty-six.” He takes a moment, breathes short and choppy like he’s asthmatic– and all of a sudden she’s starting to remember more of everything. She never really forgot, did she? It was always there, ready to bubble back up. That summer. The town, what was the town called? Young faces, familiar faces, swim into view, illuminated in pearly summer light. It’s too early in the morning for this. Her head hurts.

“Why are you in Portland, Richie?” she asks– she has to ask. Nothing’s adding up. “How did you know where to find me?”

“I didn’t,” he says simply. “I don’t know how I got here.” It doesn’t *sound* like a lie, but dread wells up in her heart anyway.

“You can tell me, you know. I promise, whatever’s going on, I can help. I can try to help, you can trust me. Is it drugs? Drinking? Money?” She knows it’s none of those things. “Listen, I know we haven’t talked in– god, how long’s it been?”

“Like an hour,” Richie grumbles with a half-smile. “I don’t know, Beverly Marsh. How long *has* it been?”

“Richie,” she pleads, he’s not making any sense, “you can tell me, you *know* you can.” She has no notion of what she’s really supposed to do, here, but she does remember the trust, the spilled secrets so long ago, she remembers that all too well. “You know that.”



He raises an eyebrow. The lines of his mouth soften, if only a little. "This is gonna sound so fuckin' stupid, Bev."

She lets herself laugh. "Oh, coming from you."

"You're not gonna believe me." He's serious.

"We've done a lot of things we don't really believe." He blinks at her. She holds out her palm, slashed with white scarring in a clumsy arc. "I remember. Not everything, but I do, Rich, I remember you." A long pause. "And *it*."

He lifts his palm to match hers with a quizzical look in his eyes. He doesn't have a scar. Not even a raised line in his skin, no discoloured patch, nothing. Something deeply wrong has happened. In the back of her mind, Beverly understands in this moment that this is a man that cannot possibly be lying to her.

"Bev," he starts, "I'm not crazy."

"Okay."

"Swear to god on my life, I swear on— I don't know, what'll you remember— Bill's little brother, I swear on that."

"Okay."

"So. Uh. I've come from the future." He's sweating. "Fifteen years, or something like that. Fourteen? Fifteen. I'm— I'm fucking *forty*, Bev. I woke up here, and— and *now*, and I don't know how or why."

"Okay." Her head's buzzing. It's really too early. "Okay. You're from the future. You're forty years old and from the future."

He stares at her. "You're really just gonna accept that. I mean, what the fuck, Beverly. Slam the door in my face, slap me into my right mind, I don't know, you can't just *believe* me."

"Richie, we fought a killer clown when we were thirteen," she says, and manages to convince herself that this could, theoretically, make some sort of sense in a world where they accept the clown thing as real.

He frowns. "I guess we did do that. Yeah, hey, y'know, that was fucked up. I mean, I never got to really say it but Jesus Christ."

"No, hey, wait," she says, head pounding, "wait, wait, fifteen years from now, that's twenty-seven years after... after... did you..." She doesn't want to ask, doesn't really want to hear the answer.

A slow nod. "We killed it, Bev. That was a few months ago for me." He looks terribly sad, though she supposes he's looked that sad for the length of the conversation. She remembers a vision, or half of one, and wonders.

"Killed it?" She just wants to make sure.

"Dead as a doorknob. As *Spider-Man* on Broadway. Dead— dead as fuckin' dead gets, I swear."

She hesitates, doesn't want to pose the last possible question. Her luck's so rotten, and she doesn't want to chance it.

"You're happy," Richie says before she can form the words. "Hey, you're really happy. All of you." He's looking at his shoes. She touches his face, tilts it up to look at him.

"But you aren't," she murmurs, knowing. He nods and coughs and gives her a dizzyingly bright, terribly fake smile before turning away again. She can't take it, it's the saddest thing she's ever seen. "Oh, Richie."

"I can't really talk about it, it'll fuck up the timeline, we'll get stuck in a loop," he mutters in a toneless, thick voice. "You know I'm not allowed to talk about it. I dunno, is it Back To The Future rules? Are we talking Star Trek, what's the— fuckin'— protocol?" He's shaking. "Hey, what am I supposed to do?"

It's all she can do to hug him, tight. Tighter. Even if he's fucking with her, even if it's all some insane hallucination or just a bad dream, even then. He stiffens, then softens, then hugs back. They sit there in each other's arms for a while, listening to each other's heartbeats and both trying very hard to be strong.

"Nothing lasts forever," he says into her hair, with a terrible

seriousness.

“No,” she agrees. “Not much, anyway.” She lets go, stands up, kicks at the dirt. “I’ll make breakfast.”

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Halfway through breakfast Richie drops his fork with a clatter and says, “Oh, what the fuck.”

Bev looks at him sideways. “What’s on your mind?” She’s flipping pancakes in the big kitchen upstairs where all the rooms are flooded with light, and he’s sat at the granite kitchen island eating noisily.

“Um, nothing,” he says, too quickly. “Just... I don’t know. If I don’t punch a hole in the space-time continuum by accident, maybe I could... change... things... Wait, Bev, you’re twenty-six?”

“Last I checked.” She flips the pancake; it’s nice and golden brown. She’s not sure how, but she can’t make a bad pancake.

“And you’re still living in a basement suite?” He snorts. “Last I saw you you were—”

“Please don’t tell me my future,” she says quickly. “I really don’t want to know. Just in case. Space-time continuum, and all.” He shrugs. “And I’m taking my time with my degree. Fashion. I mean, Richie, I started in Nursing, I know, *Nursing*, so that was a couple years down the drain. Can’t really do more than three classes a semester; I’ve got two jobs. Three, this summer, but it’s... fine. It’s a life. I’ve got savings, and all. I’m alright. I’m graduating in a year, if nothing fucks up spectacularly.” Though something always seems to fuck up spectacularly— but Richie doesn’t need to hear that. She wants to change the subject, there’s still so much to figure out, logistically. “What are *you* doing, right now? I mean, you when you were twenty-six, Richie? Where are you supposed to be?”

He thinks for a second. “Oh, yeah, I guess LA, god, in that horrible apartment when I was still starting out and doing the really shitty club circuit and also worked at Target.” She grins at that, just the

image of Richie in a cherry-red polo shirt. “Hey, don’t talk shit about Target, Target’s the only good department store. The only one, Bev,” he says, chewing, “oh, *fuck*, do I have to pay rent right now? How do I– I don’t remember my landlord’s number. If I didn’t save it to contacts, I’ll travel even further back in time and jump off a bridge.” He reaches into his pocket and pulls a hilarious, horrified face. “Is this a *flip phone*, fuck my life, *2002*, Richie, it’s *2002*.”

“What, you got holograms in the future?” Bev quips. “Please tell me you don’t have holograms yet, I don’t want to have to deal with holograms.”

“Have I ever told you that you’re the only person in the entire world that I trust, Bev Marsh?” Richie drawls, then sees the look on her face. “Joke, joke, that was a *joke*.”

“If anything I’d have thought that person would be Eddie,” she says, nonchalant, as the pan starts sizzling a little too loud.

And it’s like all the colour drains from the room in an instant. He drops the fork again, and the sound hurts their ears. *Not Eddie, oh no, tell me nothing happens to Eddie...*

“I guess it would be,” he says, measured and curt and staring very hard at the wall. “I guess it would be, Eddie.”

It feels like her stomach’s curdled, actually curdled. This is worse than the memories coming back, this is– well, it’s the vision, again, from when she was below– she thought it had just been coming back slowly but no, that had been it, that had been *all of it*. And there it is again, there she is back in Derry, in the future. The Richie in the vision has the same sad eyes as this one, and Eddie isn’t there, and Stan isn’t, either. It’s like... like the world’s tilting, like the lights are swimming, like the sky is starting to fall. She looks again at her scar, again at Richie, whose jaw is set like steel, whose eyes are elsewhere.

“I don’t know what’s supposed to happen,” she starts, slow, though she has her suspicions, “in the future. In your future. I don’t know. You don’t have to say. But maybe,” her pancake is burning, she tips it onto a plate and then into the trash, “*maybe* this– whatever this is, whatever sent you back here, whatever’s going on, maybe it’s telling

you to fix it. Maybe you're supposed to set things right." She thinks she almost glimpses something else in her peripherals, another vision maybe, something more dark and chaotic, but the burnt smell keeps her on her feet.

Richie looks at her and sees her, really *sees* her. "Well, maybe." They're quiet for a little longer before he slaps on that horrible smile again. "Hey, this is great, by the way."

This all feels deeply absurd, but she can't exactly say that. *I'm talking to a forty-year-old. I'm comforting my friend, a forty-year-old man from the future. He fell out of the sky and onto my porch. And it's an altogether otherwise normal Sunday morning, and we have to save our friends from the worst of timelines, and we're all just supposed to be okay. Okay, then. Okay.*

Bev is rolling pancake batter around her frying pan. Bev is seeing hot, minute flashes of lives unlived, bodies in rivers and holes through hearts and worse, sadder things. Bev is twenty-six and unequipped for everything.

Across the continent in Derry, Maine, Mike Hanlon gets an awful headache.

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In his dream, Richie is back in a bigger body, one that sags.

Blinking the clouds from his vision he finds he's at the barrens again, standing at the pebbled shore by the still green water, only it's not so still. The trees breathe, heave, sigh. His thirteen-year-old self is pulling himself out and onto the other side of the brook, splashing, sopping wet and probably still lighter than a feather, the lucky, stupid little asshole.

The kid stretches out, just sort of stands there in the dappled yellow light like a housecat sunning. There's a little stolen knife in his pocket, dulled from scratching into something that didn't want to ever bear the names it did. Richie *knows* there's a knife in that pocket. It's one of the only things he remembers from Derry with any

level of clarity to it– that day, and all of Eddie.

And suddenly he's sadder than he's ever been, somehow, sad like in the way that hurts, like really *hurts*. Not angry like he'd been for the weeks immediately following. Not sullen and spaced-out and thoughtless, like he'd been ever since. Sad like *sad*, not for anything in particular, and not for anyone but that kid on the far shore.

*Be who you want to be, be proud*, say the trees, and he wants to shout, *nobody would fucking let me*. He wants to shout, *you try, you fucking try*. He doesn't shout.

That day was probably the most afraid he'd ever been, and that's counting the first time they went into the Neibolt house, and that's counting the second time they'd gone into the sewers, and that's counting when Eddie died in his arms. And there had been no Bowers, no schoolyard bully, nothing but a lonely kid scared shitless of *himself*, who knew nothing good could come of this, nothing good that would stay, carving into the wood anyway, trying to make *something* last anyway. It's the same scene, after twenty-seven years nothing about Derry has changed, not the bridge and not the river and not him. Everything always reminds him of everything else. Both of the Richies are crying– well, in the dream. He almost calls out, almost lifts his hand to reach. Then again the days are already gone.

When he wakes up in a body that hasn't quite yet set to rotting, he feels oddly relieved. He'd been afternoon-napping– time travel is *incredibly* exhausting, alright– on Bev's couch– well, not *Bev's* couch, but she hasn't got a couch in the basement, so. He wrenches himself upward and sets down the stairs and knocks loudly on her door. He realizes he'd slept with his shoes on. He realizes there's a growing hole between the canvas and the rubber of the sole.

He swallows, ignores it for now. "Beverly Marsh, I have a *horrible* plan, just absolute dogshit, can you please please please talk me out of it."

She swings open the door, cocking an eyebrow in a way that is honestly very scary to Richie. "Well, I love plans."

God, and her room is so cool, because of course it is, green walls covered in thumb-tacked posters and sketches and weird bits of poetry, and he admires a lovely crayon drawing of several naked dancing women while he says through the side of his mouth, "We're gonna get the Losers back together."

Immediately, "That is a terrible—"

"That is a *terrible* idea, yep, got it, but hear me out, what if it isn't?"

She's smiling in that way she does where her eyes sparkle but she's trying desperately not to approve. "And how do you expect to drag everyone back to— where would we even— we're not going back to *Derry*, are we?"

"God, no," Richie says. He doesn't ever want to see Derry again, though he supposes he'll probably have to eventually, if his plan works anything like he's imagining it might. Thirteen years could be enough to figure it all out, he supposes. "Somewhere else. I guess we'll ask around. I guess most of everyone else is on the east coast, so probably there..."

"I presume we've all got *jobs*, Richie," she presses, "and, and *lives*, and things. How are you going to convince them?"

He gently takes her wrist and turns it over, traces the white scar with his thumb. "Bingo. Drop everything and run."

"You're not going to cry *it*, Richie."

"Well, it's life or death, isn't it. I have." He sucks in a breath, doesn't want to even dream that this could be possible, but he has to, and there's that stupid glimmer again. "I have ideas. You know, to fix... all of this. The things that go wrong. In a short period of time. Easily. And, and *safely*, and I know that might seem dumb, or, like, *grossly* out of character for me, to which I would say, yeah, maybe, but this time, *this time* I've got to do *something*, Bev."

She honestly looks impressed. "Are you gonna tell them?"

"Tell them what?" *Oddly defensive, Tozier...*

She squints. "About... the time travel? The time travel, Richie. Because you travelled. Through time."

He hadn't considered that, which is honestly pretty funny, and stupid even for him. "I don't know."

"Because I just feel like... that's important. That's an important thing."

"I just don't want them freaking out on me."

"So we're crying *it*."

Richie blinks. Thinks for another half-second. "We can say I've had visions." Beverly tilts her head, considering. "Out of nowhere. Visions like yours, visions that are, I mean, much much *worse*, you know, reasonable cause for worry. I mean, that's sort of just *true*, right? It's not cheating to lie about something that's true, we'll ask them to get together and drive out east and give them time to get their shit together and, and." He hasn't really thought it all through but it's like his brain's on fire, he just has to get the spark to fly. "Fake it. And, I don't know. Fix this."

Before Bev can reply, her phone rings. They both jump out of their skins, and she laughs a little, embarrassed.

"Beverly Marsh, speaking."

And her face goes white as a sheet. Wordlessly, she puts it on speaker.

"Hey, uh, it's Mike— Mike Hanlon," a deep voice says, and Richie honestly feels like he's losing his mind. "Remember me? Say you remember me, otherwise this is all gonna sound pretty weird."

*Mike?* Richie mouths to Bev.

"Mike," Bev chokes out, "Jesus Christ, we were— well we were just thinking of calling you."

"Who's we?"



“Hey,” Richie says, a little goofily. He’d never known Mike as well as he really should have tried to. “It’s Richie. Tozier. If you remember.”

“I felt something,” Mike says without saying hi back, *okay, rude*, “I–I’ve been living in Derry, I mean, I still live here, I’ve been setting up all these instruments, for, I dunno, *spiritual* things, measurements, most of them are bullshit but I thought I should still maybe *try*, and this morning I felt this horrible pain. Like, ha, it’s stupid but it was like... like the sky was splitting. And all the instruments were whacked out when I checked them, every one. No earthquake, no electrical storm, nothing, and I.” He sounds sheepish. “I just wanted to ask. Just in case you knew of anything. Anything weird. If you’ve seen anything. If you felt anything, Beverly.” There’s a pause. “Wait, why the hell is *Richie* there?”

“I’ve been having visions,” he cuts in gingerly. “Yeah, I know, what the fuck, but like *bad*. Like shit we gotta deal with. You know how in horror movies someone will get a vision and just sort of go, *well, that was weird*, and then they die exactly how they did in the vision, because they’re idiots, yeah, so it’s like that. And I was in town and, you know, bumped into Bev. So. That’s probably what the whole. *Thing* was, this morning.”

“That doesn’t seem right, you didn’t look into the lights like how Bev did, or anything, you’re not close to Derry like me. It could just be bad dreams, Richie, are you sure?” Mike sounds so goddamn skeptical, *there goes the plan*, of course *he’d* see straight through it, and Beverly says “Yes,” at the exact same time as Richie says “Actually, no,” because he knows it won’t fly. He haltingly explains the whole time travel thing while Bev looks like she’s about to have a legitimate conniption at all of this.

“Okay,” says Mike, and Richie really *feels* like he’s about to have a legitimate conniption, because *these fuckers will really believe anything, huh*. “Yeah, that makes more sense.”

“How could that possibly make *more sense*?!”

“I’ve been reading up on things,” Mike says, “and cross-referencing it with the stuff Bev saw. You know, the– the *lights*, and stuff. And Bev, well, you *saw* the future, didn’t you? You saw *a* future.”

"I guess."

"So there's already a precedent for... time... stuff."

"I did see the lights," Richie says quietly, "in the future. Looked right in them. And I was fine, you know, for months. I had other things on my mind. But... I saw them too."

"So that's a link," Mike points out, maybe sounding a little too excited. "You both saw the lights, at different points in time, and survived it somehow. That shouldn't be possible, from what I've read, but you did it. It might've given you some sort of- I don't know, a psychic link, something that could transcend a whole timeline. The link must've gotten unburied and- yeah, that'd make sense, you can't *have* a psychic link at two different spots on the timeline, so the universe might have..." He pauses. "Self-corrected. Somehow."

"You're insane," Richie says, "you're an insane person. You made that up from movies."

"If we accept the theory that something *made* the universe, you don't have to believe it but, you know, magic is real, or at least unnatural things are, *created* things are, things we can't explain with science- if we accept that, then, you know, the only other way we can really interpret this is that, well, the universe thinks you have to be here, Richie."

"So, it's magic," Beverly deadpans. "It's just... magic."

"Well... yeah."

Richie sighs. "So we don't know the rules and we can't explain it and it makes no sense and we don't know why it's 2002 and we don't have a way to get me back to my body and it's *magic*. *Cool*. Y'know, that's great, actually. Yeah, cool."

Beverly touches his shoulder. He didn't realize he'd been trembling. "Mike," she says, "Richie's timeline... it didn't go quite right. And now he's here. And he wants to fix things, so we're thinking... we might get the Losers back together, Mike. Talk things through, make sure we stop... forgetting."

"That's a good idea." Mike sounds like he's smiling. "That's a great idea. When, were you thinking? We can meet up in Derry, I've got—"

"No," Richie interrupts, "no, not Derry, just trust me on that. You know what, we'll talk to the others first, try to figure out a game plan."

"Well, you can call me anytime."

"I know," says Richie, "and hey, I don't know if I'm gonna tell the others about the whole..."

"Time travel thing?"

"Yeah." He's decided. He just doesn't want to make things *weird*. Isn't particularly interested in micro-managing everyone else's futures. "We'll get back to you when we can, Mike. Thanks for... explaining. Or, giving us *an* explanation. Whatever. Thanks, really."

When the call ends, after Mike gives them everyone's current numbers, Richie steadies his hand against the wardrobe. *I saw the lights*. He supposes he did. It's not an easy thing to remember.

His head is swimming. Three lights, swimming. A large looming dark. Darker than anything, darker than sleep. He'd forgotten the lights. How could he have... *Deadlights*, was that what future Mike had called them? Well, that was before... before... Three lights, swimming. The world as an egg. The world in his hand. The world, dying, in his hands. Three lights, swimming. Time as a flat circle. Echoes of things. Plants breathing, choppy breathing, something small crying out. The sky falling. A tower, falling. Three lights, swimming—

"*Richie*." A soft hand on his cheek, chipped nail polish in leaf green. His eyes fly open to meet Bev's. He's sat on the bedroom floor leaning against the wall. She's crouching over him, cradling his face. "Richie, talk to me."

"Visions," he manages to say, with a shrug that hurts his shoulders and a smile that strains at his cheeks. "More visions. Sorry. Fuck, I should've said I was dreaming of... I don't know, your mom? Is that

still funny?”

She leans back, sits cross-legged in front of him. “It never was.” She’s grinning, though. “You were only out for a minute. Let’s call Bill.”

“Oh, yeah, Bill Denbrough, the perpetual protagonist of life.”

“Richie!”

“What? He is.”

Bill Denbrough is a ghostwriter in Crossroads, Maine, still just a stone’s throw from Derry, saving to move out to LA, and he remembers them almost instantly, and very bashfully, and very warmly. He listens, patient as a goddamn saint, as Richie tells his story about his horrible, dastardly visions. And he believes them. And he wants to help.

“I’m really glad you called,” he says, and Richie just *knows* his eyes are creased in a sweet, sad way, because they always are. “I– I’m really glad it’s not anything worse. I was worried it m-might be.”

“Well, it’s *potentially* worse,” Richie points out. “*Potentially* all of you could die and *potentially* we could stop it, through, you know, the power of friendship, or whatever.”

“Richie, cut it out,” says Bev. She’s been oddly quiet throughout the call. “And anyway, Bill, we don’t really– we don’t exactly have a *plan* yet–”

“My aunt has a lake house in New York state,” Bill says, *god, he’s so frustratingly convenient*, “it’s close-by, for a few of us at least, well, for me. Not too far from Derry. She died a few months ago, her will’s still being contested, nobody’s gonna be there for months.”

“I could kiss you,” Richie says. “You wonderful asshole.”

And then that’s the plan, that’s their plan. A week from tomorrow they’ll meet up at Bill’s dead aunt’s dead summer home just outside of Mayfield, New York, where they’ll stay for no longer than a week, probably less, hopefully less. What exactly they’re going to *do* there is nebulous, but isn’t that the Losers’ whole *modus operandi*– to just

sort of go somewhere and let the universe give them a problem once they arrive? Looking for trouble, or otherwise looking to make some?

Before they hang up, Bill says, "Richie, thank you." Richie hums upwardly. "Because when you called, the memories came back. And it— it actually felt good. Comforting. 'C-cause my brother died, and all this time, I thought— I thought I would never know why. And I remember now. And I don't want to forget that ever again."

Bev beams at the phone. "You're so goddamn serious, all the time," Richie groans, and then says, "but yeah. No, yeah, I get that. It... it gives you something that you think you can actually fight. And, hey. Maybe even win." It feels good, to say that, and maybe the glimmer of hope in him swells a little. "So anyway, thanks for the Fuck Mansion, Bill! I'm so glad your family's loaded!"

Ben is somehow even easier to convince than Bill. He's quiet and calm and asks them about their own lives, and how they're getting on, and he's just so *nice*. He's at grad school in New York state, funny, that. He's got a part-time job but he assures them that it's no trouble at all to take time off, that he's happy to see them, that even if nothing was wrong he'd still want to see them.

"Honestly, I'm just glad for the vacation," he says lightly. "I mean, I'd forgotten you existed until about seven minutes ago but I'm just so happy we all get to meet up again."

Richie sticks his fingers into his throat and mimes throwing up. Bev laughs and tells Ben he's such a sweetheart, and to drive safe, and to call back if anything changes. It's nice. It really is.

And suddenly Richie has a much bigger problem.

Beverly's pointer finger falls over the number in her notebook scrawled messily beside the words STANLEY and URIS, and under that is one marked EDDIE and KASPBRACK, and there's that swelling sadness from his dream again, there's that hole in him. *Fuck this, really, fuck this...*

"Richie," Bev starts, "Richie it's going to be *okay*. They're here, and they're alright, and you can do this. They're alright. And so are you.

Here and now. It's 2002, Richie. And you're twenty-six."

Richie can only think about how he never went to Stan's funeral. It would have been wrong. Or, that's what he'd thought, at the time. At the time he was mostly thinking about Eddie. Him and Stan hadn't talked, not since they'd graduated, and vanished in opposite directions, they'd been best friends, it had been twenty-two years. *So be true. Be brave.* His poor wife. He still thinks about Stan's wife a lot. He'd never even gotten her name. He should've explained. Or tried to. Or something.

"Can you please call again some other time?" comes the whisper from the phone speaker. Richie jumps, shakes his head, that voice, he could cry with how happy he is to hear that voice.

"Stan?" Bev's voice is lowered, too. "Stan, it's Beverly. Marsh."

"And Richie. Tozier," adds Richie Tozier, through the thickness in his throat.

"God," comes the whisper, "*god*. No fucking way."

"Yeah fucking way!" Richie surprises himself with his own *joy*. That's worrying, maybe, but he's rolling with it. "Look at your hand, Stan. Okay, now feel for the scar on your cheek."

"Fucking what."

"You remembering? Good. Okay now don't panic. *Really* don't panic, but we have to talk."

"Fucking *what*, Jesus *Christ*, this can't be happening. Oh, this cannot be happening. Fuck fuck fuck fuck *fuck*." A beat. One more. And one more. "Okay I'm calm."

"Why the fuck are you whispering, dude?"

Stan harrumphs. "Richie, I'm- I'm bird-watching, okay?" Richie cackles. "I'm *bird-watching*. Yeah, yeah, make fun of me, just- Richie, I don't want to startle them."

"Awww, you mean like this?" And Richie lets out a terrible shout,

“*FUCK*,” loud like he’s been *shot*, and Bev barks out a laugh. Stan yelps and drops the phone and scrambles for it.

“You know what, I always hated you, Richie Tozier, you, stupid, idiot, *asshole*, I was having a peaceful moment, you know, getting real fucking *zen*, and you just. You just—”

“What was the bird?” Beverly asks, sweet as anything.

“There wasn’t a bird,” he grumbles, “I was waiting for the bird.”

Stan, they learn, somehow wound up in Atlanta, the nothing-est of American cities, and as an *accountant*, really, an accountant of all things. He’s very solemn through their explanation, and accepts it as true as long as he’s sure he hasn’t done the math wrong and the twenty-seven years aren’t already up.

“No no no, this is different,” Richie explains, “It’s a pre-empt. Preventative. I just really don’t wanna be the asshole that saw the future and didn’t do anything about it.”

There’s a long, sorry pause. “New York is far, Richie.” His voice sounds faraway, too.

His heart sinks to his toes. “You’re scared.”

“Of course I’m fucking scared,” Stan snaps, “I’m on the second-highest dose of Prozac my doctor’s ever prescribed, Richie, yeah, you’re having visions out of nowhere, *yeah*, I’m scared.”

“Stan.”

“I mean, I mean maybe I just *don’t want to come*, okay, is that so— is that so *crazy*, is that so wrong, I have a normal life, and I’d really very much like to forget this ever happened and—”

“Stan,” Bev pleads, but it isn’t nearly enough.

“—And go back to looking for Mourning Doves, you didn’t *have* to call, and *it’s* not back, or anything, there’s nothing to *face*—”

“Stan,” Richie says, “cut the crap. Just fucking cut the crap, okay?”

You know what you said at your Bar Mitzvah, Stan? To a big fucking crowd of snoring uncles, and tutting bubbes, and *me*? In the back, waiting for the part where everyone's supposed to throw Jolly Ranchers at your face? You know what you said?"

"I repressed that, but go on."

"You said, 'I know I'm a loser.'" He lets that sit. "And that you always *fucking* would be."

Stan agrees to come. Despite himself, he's not a goner yet. Richie refuses to let that happen, so Stan agrees to come, laments the drive, and cusses them out for a while. And that's it, then, and Bev smiles once they hang up, giddy like a little kid, and out of nowhere Richie becomes convinced that this has all just been a very long dream, or a dream within a dream, and at any moment now he'll wake up all full of holes again in Chicago.

Bev hands him the phone— a chunky Nokia 3510, for those interested— but he won't take it, he's got his head in his hands, he's not ready for this, of course he's not.

"Rich."

"Quiet, just be quiet."

She's quiet. They sit.

"Do you." She stops. "Do you want to tell me what happens, to...?"

"Not fucking likely."

"Okay. That's okay."

It takes a minute. He takes the phone, dials the number without thinking about it, he wouldn't ever forget that number, not even for a goddamn extra-dimensional nightmare clown.

It rings.

It goes to voicemail.



Richie starts crying, just, crying, which is so stupid, he should be happy, there's at least still a smidgen of a chance of *something*, Eddie's alive, he's alive, he can just call back so why the fuck is the hole still there. Bev holds his wrist and squeezes as he gulps in air, as he swallows the lumps in his lungs, as he dials again. And he waits. It doesn't take long.

"Yeah, hey, who the fuck is this? I was at work, I was in a meeting, would you please fuck off if you're trying to sell me something, please, because I swear to you I probably already have it."

"Sorry, sir," says Richie, he doesn't know where the words are coming from but he's managing a pretty fucking good customer service voice for someone who was sobbing not thirty seconds ago, "if you're already all stocked up on Viagra I guess I'll just hang up, it's just that I've got quotas to fill and you seemed like such an ideal candidate for our product, did you want me to tell you about our special offers—"

"Is that." Eddie pauses. "Oh, fuck you, Richie. Ha. Oh god. Really just fuck off with that."

"Touched a nerve, huh? Is anybody really *touching* your *nerves* these days?"

Beverly is staring open-mouthed at Richie, mouthing *what the fuck* to an invisible camera, but he doesn't care, doesn't have time to care, not when something's so loudly and uproariously clicking back into place.

And it's like nothing had ever happened. Though, of course, everything had.

"I'll have you know that I am. Not. A virgin." A beat. "Anymore."

"Oh you're gonna have to prove that, Eds."

"Fucking call me Eds one more time, damn you to hell. Why are you calling, don't you know I've got— my lunch break isn't that long, you know, I've *actually* got quotas to fill— I mean, not that I'm mad or anything but it's just not a great time, and anyway we haven't even

talked since, what, fucking, *graduation*, Richie, what's going on."

Richie is calmer than he's been in a year. What hole in him? "Eddie, would you look at your hand?"

"Which hand, I have two hands, you know you are so *fucking* weird."

"The arm you broke, would you look at that hand, just listen to me for once."

"Oh god. Where did this even... oh *god*."

"Okay, stay calm, just stay calm."

"*Stay calm*," Eddie mocks. "Is this real? What I'm remembering, is this fucking real right now or just some— I don't know, did you spike my drink, what sort of shitty— Richie— *Richie*, what— what is this—?"

And so he explains. Well, he lies. Bev chips in as best she can. Eddie is breathing chopply. Eddie is swearing every second breath.

"Damn you to hell, Tozier, what fucking bullshit," he pants when they're done, "You know I'm very happy here in this city, you know, and, and I can't take time off this job or I'll get fired and I'll never get hired anywhere else because I'm only here because my uncle knows my boss, and then I won't have a future and all my college debt will be for nothing and I'll be, you know, homeless, and and *sick*, and die before I'm forty and *damn you*, Richie, you know this is so *like you*, you know, I don't have time for this, you know I hope you're really just *fucking with me* because I didn't want to spend my lunch break thinking about that *fucking* clown for the first time in ten years."

"But... you have to come," Richie says stupidly. For once he's really just dumbstruck. "We need everyone to be there. The whole Loser enchilada, Eds, you're the sour cream. It could save.. *our*.. lives."

"Well tell that to my corpse when I get evicted and thrown out onto the streets and I get addicted to crack. And, and you know, I can't go anyway, not for— what'd you say, a *week*? Yeah, ha, *no*, my girlfriend will fucking kill me if I just fuck off in the middle of the night, try again next time you have a nightmare."

The words hang like they're humid, and Richie feels very cold, *this can't happen again, I won't let this happen to you again.*

"I will give you three thousand dollars," he blurts out, *why, Richie, fucking why*, "to come."

And Eddie's on him like the meanest, worst math teacher, "Oh you drive such a hard fucking bargain, yeah, right. What'd you do, become a drug dealer, you know for those really experimental bullshit placebo things they only give out at festivals to girls on exchange programs from Holland— honestly, I just don't think you have it in you, Rich."

Only then does he remember that he's broke in this timeline. In *debt* in this timeline, actually, fuck. Never mind all that.

"No, I've really got that money," *are you fucking insane, Richie Tozier*, and Bev is pulling this insanely funny confused-and-slightly-angry face at him, "yeah I mean I was gonna go to Coinstar and turn it into a bunch of sexy crisp ones to stick in your mom's g-string, and that's a pretty fucking wide waist so obviously I needed to break *so many* piggy banks—"

"Oh fuck you, you know you are such a *turd*." But Eddie's laughing a little, and his voice sounds genuinely remorseful. "I can't, Rich, not for money, not for anything, I'm sorry, I just, I just *can't*, this is so short-notice."

"Oh come on, you're like a three hour drive, you asshole, don't sound so sad-puppy about it."

Beverly says, "Eddie, we need you, we really do. This is life or death, okay?" Her fingers tangle with Richie's, she squeezes his thumb. "This is *real*. See your scar? You said you'd come back, Eddie, we all did, we swore. Hold on to that. We can't let it happen to anyone else, remember?"

"I remember." Eddie sounds solemn, pensive, in a way that isn't like him. "Yeah, I remember." He takes a deep, audible breath. "Okay. Okay, you know what, okay, *fuck*, fuck it, *okay*, but only because I do not want to fucking die *at all*, and." He sounds like he's smiling.

“Well, I did miss you.”

What hole in him? “That... is literally the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me? What the fuck. How is “I missed you” the fucking *perfect ten*, here? You’re a horrible friend, Eddie, you know that, right?”

“You’re worse.”

“Boys,” says Bev, and they reign themselves in and hash out the plan.

When it’s over, and Richie’s said his last joke, and Eddie’s gone back to work, Richie and Bev are still sat on her bedroom floor, and an odd quiet washes over them.

“So that’s that,” says Richie.

“That wasn’t so bad, was it?”

“No, it really wasn’t.” *Not so bad*, who is he kidding, Richie’s heart is doing kickflips, his neurons are shooting fireworks, he’s motherfucking twenty-six, it’s 2002, and he has to be doing *something* right if he feels this happy, if he’s got even a one-in-a-hundred shot at rewriting this horrible goddamn movie, because that’s what this all feels like– not a dream he’s scared to wake up from but a story he’s on the second draft of, a tangible malleable thing he can wrench back into place.

And so they get up, and they start to plan.

No Google Maps in the past, but Beverly is smart and resourceful and has a nice big *Guide To The Great American Road Trip* stuffed in a box somewhere and estimates that it’ll probably take a week, you know, if they’re normal about it and take a lot of breaks.

Richie sees the title and laughs. “This is not a road trip.”

“It’s a trip,” Bev says pointedly.

“It technically could be considered a trip, across a road.”

“So, a road trip.”

“No, not a goddamn road trip,” Richie says, “we’re not having epiphanies across state lines, here. Let me guess, you want to lie on the roof of the car and watch for meteors, you want to see every single World’s Biggest Rubber Band Ball, oh, lay off, Ferris-Bueller’s-Nameless-Girlfriend. We’ve got a real mission.”

“I don’t think I like you very much at forty,” Bev snarks.

Richie feels strangely ashamed, and then so does she. “Well, nobody really does.”

They get back to work.

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### III. Interstate

It’s July, 2002. The radio plays *Hot in Herre* and *A Thousand Miles* and that’s all, but Bev has a lot of CDs.

The World’s Biggest Rubber Band Ball is in Wales, actually, well out of the way, but that doesn’t stop them from seeing at least two legitimate claimants to the title along the 3,026 mile stretch of their long hard trek across the country, as well as The Largest Ball Of Twine, and One Of The Biggest Baskets. They take the southernmost route, the one that crosses Oregon and Idaho, dips into Utah, then stretches through Wyoming, Nebraska, Iowa, Illinois and Indiana, hits the southern tip of Lake Michigan, crosses Ohio all along the silver shores of Lake Erie, and scoots by Pennsylvania before swinging up triumphantly into New York state.

They try to drive for seven hours a day, trading places around noon, and mostly sleep in strip mall parking lots, their seats knocked back, stars winking through the sunroof on the edge of whatever highway they’ve just hit. They eat a lot of McDonald’s and drink a lot of soda and it’s like they’re kids, again. They’d never known each other as teenagers, but they both suspect it would’ve turned out a lot like this, a lot like all of this. They don’t talk about the future, but they talk

about just about everything else.

“We could have flown, y’know,” Richie puts forth when they’re eating ice cream in a tiny town just outside of Des Moines, and Beverly hits him, and he hits her back. They laugh at that. Who would have wanted to have flown? Besides, they’re both broke.

Richie spends a lot of this time acclimating to the time period, which is harder than he’s expecting. 2002 doesn’t sound like long ago, but then again, Bush hasn’t invaded Iraq yet, and Mark Zuckerberg is still in high school. None of his jokes land right, his references are all out of whack unless they’re purely vintage, and he doesn’t remember what he’s supposed to remember, but then again it’s only Bev, so he’s able to bounce most of his questions off her— incessantly, because what is Richie if not incessant? It helps that Beverly is one of the funniest people he knows, in that natural sort of way he’s always envied, with a groundedness to her, a knowingness. It helps that they detour, that they goof off, that they’re losers together. And always, always, there is the undercutting buzz of *almost there*, almost with him, almost at the beginning of his life. And he wonders, however briefly, if this isn’t all just some terribly beautiful dream he’s having.

Bev spends a lot of time wanting to cry, if she’s honest with herself. She doesn’t want to tell Richie, but it’s the best week of her life, that week, tearing down interstates and eating like crap and just *going*, she’s always *always* wanted something like this, a week like this, and Richie isn’t by any means a terrible choice for a road trip partner—even if he does snore like a mountain lion. She’s happy, *really* happy, overwhelmingly so; enough money in her savings to live like this for just a little while longer, on the cusp of finally having a career, no dad, no hovering aunt, just her and her awful car and Richie Tozier and the sky. And she wonders, however briefly, if this isn’t all just some terribly beautiful dream she’s having.

And then, that *perfect* sunset.

It’s almost like a movie, flat plains all around, everything orange like the juiciest nectarine, a big round sun setting behind rolling roads and casting flickers of pink and rich red into the darkening clouds, and their car a stark black flat silhouette against the technicolor. That’s where they stop, anyway, on the fifth day, somewhere in

Indiana off the interstate on a hill that overlooks the whole world, it seems, horizon scattered with kettle lakes and broad-leaf forests.

Richie lets Bev drag him up to sit there, huddled on the roof of the car, his jacket around her shoulders. They share her silver canteen of gin, the worst grossest gin you can imagine. She thinks the trees almost sound like they're breathing, and everything else is still but for the petering sounds of the highway.

"This is so nice," she says, and Richie hums in agreement, for once not taking the piss out of the moment. So they sit there, and they sit there, as the sky purples.

"Bev?" His voice is solemn and steady.

"Yeah, Richie?"

"You might wanna steel yourself for this."

"For what?"

"The future." His eyes are elsewhere, and his face is bathed in orange light. "I think you know what happens in the future."

She swallows. She didn't think he'd ever say. "Stan," she manages. "And Eddie." She can see the cool green of the water, and the empty spaces where they should be. And then she sees—

"Stan kills himself," Richie says, his voice still holding strong. The words almost seem rehearsed. "At the end of this. None of us ever hear from him, except for Mike, when he tells him it's come back. It's a pre-empt. He thought he'd have been a liability. Or something. I never really understood."

Beverly screws her eyes shut. She can see a bathtub, clear as day, can almost feel something drip off the end of her nose.

"I never went to his funeral," he continues. "I never talked to his wife. Too fucking scared. Of facing that. I mean, he was my best friend. And then one day he wasn't. And then... one day he was gone."

“Richie, it isn’t your fault,” she says, gripping his wrist and leaning into his shoulder.

He’s soft when he says, “I know.” His voice is going now, roughening around the edges. “And Eddie...” It’s quiet for many long moments as he breathes deep, in and out, in and out. He’s crying now, like in the way that people cry in movies, tears streaming silver down his face. “And Eddie dies for me.”

Beverly’s crying a little too, for him. She holds his hand. “It doesn’t have to end like that, you know.”

“It already did,” Richie says, voice fully cracking. “And I had to— had to just *live*, like that, for *months*, like, like I could just *keep going*, like it shouldn’t have been me that died down there, like, like he didn’t get fucking impaled in front of me, like I didn’t *leave him in a sewer*, to rot, to, I don’t know, to get eaten by scavengers, everything he would’ve hated, Bev. Out of everything I wish I did differently. That’s what I think about. Eddie Kaspbrack, food for fungi.”

“Not this Eddie.”

“But that was,” he heaves, “that was *my Eddie*, right? That still *happened*, he was, *he was so afraid*, Bev. And now he’s full of worm larvae in some timeline I have to pretend doesn’t matter anymore.”

It’s all so much more complicated than she realized, it’s so much worse than she predicted, her heart aches and aches. “But this Eddie, he’s still *him*, you can still...”

“*This* Eddie is twenty-six,” he says snidely, “and I’m forty. And you know what people say about gay people being fucking predators, I mean I know we’re both *adults* but, it’s just, it’s still *weird*, right, it’s weird, it’s *weird* that I’ve seen him die, it’s weird that I’ve got thirteen years on him, I mean, I mean he’s got a *girlfriend*, Bev, you know?”

“But—”

“And I mean,” Richie rolls right over her, “I mean I’ve been in love with him since the seventh grade, Bev! And I mean love-love, like, the sickening horrible kind, the kind that really just *eats* at you and I



mean, I literally forgot about him for twenty-seven years! And then I see him again for the first time and it's like *stupid*, like real-life butterflies in the stomach, like he is such an *annoying* piece of *shit* but I'm in love with him, but I'm cursed anyway, I'm fucking *cursed*." The words fall into the wind, as the sun slips behind the sky.

"Richie, I—"

"No, actually," he turns away so she can't see his face, and it hurts, it hurts, "y'know what, actually I'm good now, Bev, like *super* fucking good, just really had to get that off my chest, WHEW! Can you believe how hard it is to just, like, be honest about your feelings? 'Cause that's new to me. That's... new. Ha. Yeah, fuck. That's new."

She doesn't know how to fix this, but when has she ever known? "Richie. Richie can you please just look at me, okay?" He does. It's like a punch to the gut, just to study his face. "I love you so much, okay? Even if you were lying out your ass about *all* of this, even if you've been on shrooms this whole time and aren't actually from the future or whatever, I still love you, and I still want you to be happy, and I still think there's a *life* for you, alright?" She's shouting a little now. "You're gonna dig yourself out of this hole, Richie Tozier, and you deserve every type of love you never got, and I'm gonna help you, and we're all gonna help you because we're Losers and that's what we fucking do." He smiles, despite himself. "Okay? Okay."

He says, "Okay." He says, "Alright." She leans into him, and he cradles her in his arms. Night falls fast, here.

"I knew," she whispers, "when we were kids."

"Knew what?"

"You and Eddie, Rich."

"Fuck, was I that obvious."

"Richie, I just wanted to say that it's so clear what you mean to each other, and even if— even if it doesn't settle the way it should, he's still *your* Eddie. And... you're not alone in the world, you know, not completely, not ever." In those last phrases she imagines she's talking

to herself. She wouldn't mind going back in time, if only to tell herself certain things that she had needed to hear.

"Oh, don't give me some inspirational Etsy-mom bullshit about loving myself and being *proud*, because I won't take it, I know you mean so well but I'm over that. Okay, I know you *want* to, I know you're writing a super nice, *very* fucking generous speech in your head that starts out with "we'll accept you no matter what" but that's really, honestly not what's going on here, if you can believe that at all."

She digs her head deeper into the crook of his arm, smiling. "What's Etsy?"

"Fuck."

Beverly tries not to think about the visions in her head, the dark cavern lit in green, the screaming and the tugging and the pointed ends of claws. She focuses on the horizon, sighing in dusky purple and the last few splotches of fading orange, cars passing, trees rustling, Richie breathing slowly and deeply and well.

"Thank you for this," he murmurs into her ear. "I know I was being a bitch about it but. Thanks. For all of it. All of that. I mean, it was a little John Hughes but that can't be helped."

"You are such a jerk."

"Why does everyone keep saying that?"

They set off in the morning into the clear of the day, and it all manages to hurt a little less. They stop at gas stations for Slurpees, Bev makes friends of all the little kids they meet at diners, they take random exits off the freeway offering scenic views because she brought her old film camera and Richie pulls funny faces in photos and the world is very big. They blast rap music Richie hasn't heard in decades, they play Bev's aunt's audiotapes of *Catcher in the Rye*, the fashion is terrible in the towns they pass through, and the cars are even worse, and on and on they go, the days are long, their sleeps are short, and the world is very big.

When they cross state lines into New York, big green maples hugging

the highway, they open the sunroof and scream, just scream, for the first time without any fear at all.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

I wrote this selfishly and strangely, almost in a daze, and far too fast to be healthy. I have only seen each of these movies once, and intend to keep it that way (lol), so facts and things might be deeply incorrect and I'm sorry if that bugs you. I also have not read any other fics on the subject, and any similarities to other works are purely coincidental. Thanks for reading- it's gonna get pretty weird. And I'm sorry if my jokes are all bad. (I'm not very funny.) The next two parts will get done when they get done, but I promise to write as quick as I can manage. Let me know what you think.

Chapter title is from Suck the Blood from My Wound by Ezra Furman. You can find me on tumblr at ofmissing, for the time being.

Extra note: I originally wanted to set this in the summer of 2001, but couldn't live with the idea that Richie Tozier could theoretically have the power to stop 9/11. But also, like... could you imagine? Now THAT'S a movie worth admission.

## 2. PART TWO: when i finally get what i deserve

### IV. The House on Priddle Point Rd.

It's not fair to say that Richie's afraid. No, because he's scared shitless, shaking like a very small dog in the front seat of the car as they make their way towards the gravel driveway at the end of the street.

"I'm being a little bitch," he says to himself.

"You're being a little bitch," says Bev, who's looking at the road.

They'd driven through Mayfield on their way– it really very much is a place that you drive *through*– a charming lake town, prettily bathed in warm afternoon light. Great Sacandaga Lake itself is pretty, too, ringed by modest beaches and kayak rental storefronts. It makes for a lovely picture, all the trees everywhere, the water and the sky. But Richie is scared shitless, and Bev is mindlessly humming, and they're pulling up already and now it's all suddenly very real.

They park halfway up the driveway and start to walk up to the house, Bev with her suitcase, Richie with one of her old duffel bags, filled with all the ugly clothes he'd bought at Sears the day they left. The house is huge and ramshackle, with an architecture that seems to defy both stylistic category and the laws of physics. It overlooks part of the lake, and a dirt path leads down to a little dock, where a rowboat is halfway sunk. There are two cars in the garage and one out front with the trunk half-open, and then there's Ben Hanscom, carrying about seven bags of groceries in one hand. He swivels and sees them and gives them the biggest, goofiest smile.

"Oh my god he's not hot yet," Richie mutters. Bev shoots him a dark look. "I'm just *saying*. Like, you're twenty-six, Ben, *god*."

"*Ben!*" Bev cries, ignoring him, and runs up to hug him. Richie elbows him and gives him a wide smile. Before they get to the door, though, it bursts open, and Bill and Mike come running out.

God, they look good. No bags under their eyes yet, at least. "You

fuckers got *sexy!*”

Mike crushes him in a hug, and Bill grabs his shoulder, and Ben finally just drops the groceries and slings Bev in one arm and makes it a *group hug*, ugh, but god, it feels nice.

“It’s good to see you,” says Mike once they all get unstuck, really meaning it.

Bill says, “Yeah, me and Mike got here this morning, and we’ve just been *talking*.” He seems so animated. “About everything, not just—just all the... *it* stuff, y-you know, *everything*, it’s like we’re still in middle school. It’s... awesome, honestly. We should’ve done this sooner. You know, if we’d remembered.”

Bev makes a pouty smile. “That is so sweet. You’re so sweet, Bill.” Ben frowns. Richie rolls his eyes. *If they’re gonna be like this the whole week...*

Before he can finish the thought, he hears the sound of wheels on stones. He turns his head, and getting out of the rental car is a face he thought he’d never see again, lips pursed in perpetual thought, hair a bit of a tangle of curls.

“Stan,” he breathes. “Shit, STAN.” And he’s walking fast, faster, running now, and Stan yelps as he hugs him, tighter than he’s ever hugged anyone, feeling brittle as bird bones. Stan hugs back, making confused noises until Richie finally unwraps himself.

“Wow, *okay*, okay, Rich, since when were you a hugger?” Stan frowns. “Then again you look like a completely different person. Not in the way that people normally, like, grow up into their faces. You sure you’re the same Richie?”

*Well, not exactly*, Richie thinks, but he says, “Fuck off,” with a grin. Then they’re just standing there, awkwardly, at the end of the driveway. “Hey, I... I missed you, buddy.”

Stan looks at him, confused. “I guess I missed you too.”

“Well, don’t you seem jazzed,” Richie drawls with a guilty pang. Before he or Stan can unpack that the others have bounded over,

reintroducing themselves and saying their hellos and dragging them back up towards the house.

“Any sign of Eddie?” Bev asks lightly as Bill pushes open the door. The interior of the house is much less weird than the exterior, all dark wood floors and chunky grey stone walls and a big fireplace in the lounge and very strange landscape paintings that all seem to be of the same lake view.

“Not yet, no.”

Richie’s heart stutters while Ben and Mike start putting groceries away neatly in the high-ceilinged kitchen, and Bev asks Bill inane questions about his aunt, and Stan keeps *looking* at him, like he’s an alien or something.

Richie tries to busy his hands, puts them into his pockets, takes them back out. Splays himself out on the floral-patterned couch, sits back up straight, takes out his phone, remembers it’s just a flip phone and he can’t, in fact, play Tiny Wings until his brain dies down, and rifles through the coffee table book, an esoteric collection of soulful black and white images of dogs. *It’s a dream*, he thinks, *it’s all a dream and someone’s going to pull me back out into the future as soon as the doorbell rings, it’s a dream, it’s just a motherfucking dream.*

“The hell’s the matter with you?” He jumps out of his skin, but it’s just Stan, sitting beside him on the couch. “You’re all... jumpy.”

“Yeah, no, fuck, yeah, sorry, just... all the... memories.” He laughs nervously. “I guess it’s just weird. Being back with everyone.”

“I guess.” There’s a pause. “But, like, is everything okay? You know, with your visions, and everything?”

Richie’s eyes are downcast. “It’s just... complicated.”

There’s a very loud and incessant rap on the door. *It’s a dream, it’s a dream.* He doesn’t even have time to freak out, like, at all. Bill goes to open it, and there he is, all 5’9 of him, young and neat in a blue polo shirt and armed with a ginormous suitcase and a rather large backpack, and he storms in blowing right past Bill, who’s earnestly

got his arms open for a hug, and loudly exclaims, “Okay, *so*, where do I put my stuff, sorry, I’ve just got to– I’m scheduled to take some meds in about seven minutes and I need to sort my shit out before then, okay? Okay.” He pauses, looks around the living room, where everyone is sort of loosely circled. “What, I got something on my face? Fuck’s wrong with you all?”

“Oh my god, Eddie,” Bev says with an easy laugh, giving him a quick hug. He smiles at that and manages to hug back despite his bags, but his eyes are darting everywhere else.

“But like seriously, this place is *not* fucking up to code in literally any way, Bill, was your aunt seriously schizophrenic, or–”

Richie stands up, spine straight. “Eds,” is all he says. Is all he can think.

“Richie?” Eddie narrows his eyes and shows a flicker of a smile. “Holy shit I swear to god I didn’t recognize you, I thought you were a Beatle.”

“I thought you were still *thirteen*, what are you, 5’2 now? Aw, ickle baby’s all grown up.”

“I’m– fucking– you know I’m *average*, right?”

“I bet you say that to all the girls.”

“Asshole.”

“Shithead.”

“Trashmouth.”

“Ooh, *that’s* nostalgic!”

All the while they’re stepping closer to one another, closer, until their noses are inches away, it’s a joke, them getting into each other’s faces like this, some stupid thing they did as kids to see who would chicken out first, but this time it’s magnetic, it really feels *magnetic*, until Richie thinks that maybe he’s just projecting and the whole thing starts to seem deeply embarrassing. Eddie’s lips are very, very red.

Richie remembers that cherry soda has always been his favourite, a guilty pleasure, what they always got from vending machines in the arcade where his childhood went to die. Why the fuck does he remember that?

“Limp-dick,” he says, loudly, not looking away. Chins nearly touching now.

“Pee-brain.”

“That’s immature. Wanna smell my breath? Open wide.”

“You are such a fucking dweeb,” Eddie spits, breaking with a nervous laugh and taking a hefty step back. Then he breaks out into a grin, *he’s so young, Christ, he’s so young*. And then the moment’s suddenly just gone, and Richie doesn’t know what to do with his hands, he wants to take Eddie’s arm or inspect his body for a chest wound or muss his hair or hug him or clean the dirt from his cold body or cup his face and knock their foreheads together but he feels very weightless, very cold, very much like he needs to sit down.

Instead he shoulders his duffel bag. “Okay, fuckers, by my count Eddie’s got about three minutes until he goes into anaphylactic shock, where are we sleeping, what’s the deal here.” There’s sweat beading on his forehead. *Wake the fuck up, Tozier*.

“Well, me and Mike have already set up in one of the bedrooms,” says Bill with a strange caution, “so I guess... if we split two people into each of the others, someone’s gotta sleep on the couch.”

“I’ll do it!” Ben offers, bless him.

“Great, thats great, okay, then... Bev, you’ll be with Richie in the basement, and Stan with Eddie upstairs?”

“Why do you get to decide?” Eddie snaps, but immediately turns and stomps up the staircase. Stan screws up his face– Richie laughs at that– and runs along after him.

“First door to the right,” Bill calls out, uselessly. Mostly Richie is thanking every god imaginable that he isn’t rooming with Eddie. What a disaster *that* would be–



“Okay, no, *definitely no*,” comes a miserable shout from upstairs and Eddie comes thundering back, “Wouldn’t you know, this motherfucker smokes *cigarettes*, I mean don’t you know how dangerous that is for you, I mean what are you, suicidal, I’m gonna get an asthma attack and die of lung cancer and you’re going to be *entirely* fucking liable, I’m not rooming with a smoker, there are *lines*.”

Stan follows him down begrudgingly, an unlit cigarette in his mouth and his bag bundled under one arm. “Fucker thinks he’s gonna *plotz*.”

“So you *admit* it’s a danger to you and everyone around you. I’m not going to apologize for my principles, okay, and if you burn down the house it’s your fault.”

“I hope you die in that very fire, Eddie.”

“Well,” says Bev, deeply strained, “Stan can take Richie’s place and stay in my room. And Richie... can room with Eddie.” *You fucking bitch*. It’s a wonder she didn’t engineer this entire conversation specifically to screw with him. He catches her eye, mouths, *fuck you*, and she feigns ignorance, continuing, “Seeing as Stan’s the only one of you assholes who *didn’t* have a crush on me as a kid.”

“Wow, I am literally right here,” Richie deadpans, just as Eddie hotly says, “That’s not true.” All seven of them experience a near-transcendentally awkward silence. Ben and Bill both laugh, but they’re tensed up like a fight’s about to happen, which would be funny if it weren’t so sad. Stan looks desperately relieved. Mike just looks confused.

Eddie gives him a once-over, squints, tilts his head. Richie tries his best to look exquisitely normal about this whole thing. “Yeah, yeah, fuckin’, whatever, c’mon, Rich.”

He comes on.

Upstairs, Eddie has already halfway unpacked his week’s worth of clothes into the aged drawers, and continues doing so immediately, not even sparing Richie a glance. There are pill bottles *everywhere* on the dresser, spilling out of a multi-tiered toiletries bag, some of them

familiar from when they were younger, some of them certainly new. He feels uncomfortable just looking at them, and silently tosses his duffel bag to the side of one of the twin beds– *thank fuck, two beds.*

None of anything feels real, yet. Eddie Kaspbrack is young and alive in a house in New York. Their atoms are existing together, somehow, in a space that is calm and quiet. Sunlight through the room's tall window catches the dust bunnies, and there's a small wilting pot of flowers in the sill, and only then does it occur to Richie that he has to at least pretend to be present or the world might actually collapse in on itself. With a sore tightness in his chest he decides to baldly stare at Eddie, at all of Eddie, just to get it over with. He's shouldered on a thin grey hoodie in the cool of the early evening, and his face is very slightly stubbly, though his trousers have been neatly pressed, and–

*Jesus.* Eddie is wearing Halloween socks, the hem ringed with tiny stitched pumpkins. For many reasons, this is incredibly distracting to Richie, and for about a full uninterrupted minute he cannot tear his gaze away from Eddie's delicate little ankles.

"It's July," he starts, nodding towards them. Eddie finally tears himself away from folding polo shirts and wrinkles his nose.

"Well I only had a week to pack, jackass– your fault, by the way– and anyway socks are socks." His eyebrows are pinched together in that way they get where he looks like a very angry shitzu more than a person. It also happens to be very, very hot.

Richie guffaws, literally *guffaws*, it's been a while since anything has caught him off-guard like this. "Socks are *SOCKS*?" And Eddie's laughing too. "You wouldn't wear themed socks on unthemed days if you were fucking *catatonic*, Eddie *Kaspbrack*, who even are you anymore, who the fuck's possessing your body? I bet it's Bill's dead sexy aunt." He moves his head in to examine Eddie's nostrils from below, "Ma'am? Ms. Denbrough, you in there? Need an exorcism? Holy water? Some adderall? A quick fuck? Hello?"

"Alright, alright, fuck outta my face, dickwad." They sit, quiet for a pregnant pause, then Eddie starts chuckling to himself. "Fuck me, man. We are so goddamn weird."

“I feel like we used to be weirder.”

“Yeah, well, not like I miss that.” Eddie smiles a sad little smile. “Or, what, maybe I do. I dunno. I thought I had shit to worry about back then. What we wouldn’t give to be stupid shit-eating kids again, right?”

Richie tastes bile in the back of his throat. He wants to say, *I’d rather die than be thirteen again*, or maybe, *What, and have to keep fucking around with that clown?* Instead he says, “Oh, yeah, for sure.”

“Oh, I mean, fuck high school—”

“Yeah, fuck that—”

“—I just mean,” Eddie says with a truly heart-wrenching softness, “it was nice. In the summers. Doing fuck-all with you.”

“Well isn’t that just the sweetest thing you’ve ever fucking said, Eds.”

“It’s 2002,” grumbles Eddie, “and you’re still calling me that, what an asshole.” But he’s grinning. And maybe, just maybe, Richie thinks, one day soon these conversations will feel entirely normal.

Someone knocks, and they jump, and they laugh at each other for jumping. “I made dinner,” Ben shouts through the door, cheerily.

And boy, has Ben made *dinner*.

On the long table in the dining room he’s placed a whole spread of cold cuts and various cheeses for sandwiches with *toasted buns*, when the fuck did he have time to toast *buns*, a metric fuckton of spaghetti, two bottles of unlabelled wine, and a big bowl of some colourful salad that really only Stan eats.

“You may not *be* a golden god, actively,” Richie says with his mouth full of pastrami, “but you are one in my heart, Ben.”

“That’s rude,” Stan mutters with a small smile, as Bev says, “Hear, hear!” and rattles her fork against her glass.

“So w-what did you say you were up to in New York, again, Eddie?”

Bill asks politely, twirling pasta with his fork.

“I’m a risk analyst.”

Mike laughs uproariously. Richie rolls his eyes and says, “He’s an *intern*.”

Everyone laughs at that, well, except Eddie, who goes pale. “Not like you’re doing shit, ass-for-brains.”

“I’ll have you know,” Richie starts, all high-and-mighty, and then remembers he’s not in Kansas anymore and he’s supposed to be twenty-six. “I am... paying... my own rent... with comedy.” He coughs, feigning humility. “Sometimes.”

Eddie does air quotes and says, “*Comedy*’.” That gets another laugh out of the table, and Richie shoves Eddie’s shoulder, and Eddie shoves back. And it’s like nothing’s changed. It’s suddenly become very easy to forget.

“And what were you up to again, Mike?” asks Ben.

“Oh, I run the library in Derry now.”

“I loved that library,” Ben says, beaming. “You know what? That’s such a good fit for you, man!”

“Hey, it’s alright. And you’re...?”

“Studying architecture, yeah, getting my masters. Interning on the side.” He turns to Eddie with a sympathetic glance. “Absolutely nothing wrong with that, by the way.”

“I– obviously there’s fucking nothing *wrong* with that, I just meant. Oh, never mind what I meant.” He’s blushing. “Can we please just agree to go back to making fun of Richie again for being incompetent so that we all feel better about our own shitty lives.”

Richie gasps. “Hey! I’m competent!”

“And that’s all you’ll ever be.”

The table laughs, especially Stan, *I thought you were supposed to be my friend, jackass*. “Yeah, yeah, fuckers, lap it up, we’ll see how funny all this is when I’m headlining at Caroline’s.” (Richie actually did a show at Caroline’s once a couple of years ago. It was one of the worst crowds of his entire life.)

“So,” Bill murmurs during a lull in the conversation. “R-Richie. Do you... when do you want to t-talk about...” He trails off, staring intensely at his plate.

“Your visions,” Mike says pointedly, with a knowing glance. “Hey, I don’t know if right now’s maybe the best time to get into it.”

Bev says, “Tomorrow,” sympathetically. “Why don’t we talk about it tomorrow, okay? That’s good for everyone, right? Richie?”

“Sounds good to me.” Richie still doesn’t really have a plan for Fixing Everything, but then again, when does he ever? “Doesn’t seem like I’ll be getting any more—”

His voice cuts out. And at first he’s confused.

And then honestly, honest-to-god, despite the irony, Richie feels like he might be having a fucking asthma attack.

It’s not really a vision, it can’t be, he can still *see*, it’s a little blurry, but no, mostly he just *can’t fucking breathe*, like, at all, the air’s going in but it’s not *breathing*, and he falls out of his chair onto the floor where he heaves, and heaves.

He can feel Bev’s hand on his shoulder, and distantly he can hear Stan’s voice, and Bill’s, and Ben’s, somebody’s yelling but his head is splitting and his chest feels like it’s collapsing and over the noise is the sound of static. He feels— what does he feel? He feels like there’s dirt in his mouth, something lodged deep in his throat, but it isn’t anything he’s eaten, he feels like there’s something crawling up his back, like his head’s submerged in water, like the sky’s falling on top of him. He manages to scoot back and sit against a wall but something really does taste like soil, to him, it smells like wet rocks and plant rot and nothing like a dining room in New York.

And then someone knocks something plastic into his mouth and squeezes and he sucks in, and in some dim part of the fog in his brain he registers that Eddie's given him his inhaler. And he breathes. And he breathes. His vision clears, and it smells like pasta sauce again, and he can feel the warmth of everyone crowded around him, and Stan's saying, "Hold on, give him some fucking space."

"Visions," he coughs out, somehow. "I'm good."

"What the fuck was that, I mean what the fuck *was* that," Eddie rants, as Bev helps Richie get off the floor, "I mean how can *visions* give you an *asthma attack*, was that even an asthma attack? What the fuck is going on?"

"Stop," Richie breathes, "talking." He gulps down a large sip of wine—which is garbage, by the way. "No, guys, it was fun, I fucking love seeing the future, it's cool, it's really cool, can I please just tell you all the gory details tomorrow when I'm not *fucking dying*?"

Now everybody's looking at him with sad, kind eyes. *There goes our fun dinner.*

Richie and Eddie get put on dishwashing duty afterwards— which is to say, Eddie volunteers to do the dishes and Richie says he'll chip in but ends up really mostly just sitting perched up on the kitchen counter, negging.

"Would you help me, dipshit," Eddie huffs, scrubbing a pot with frightening ferocity. "Because you *said* you would but I'm doing all the work, which is basically my entire fucking life story, and is exactly how all of our group projects went, and also incidentally why I went to college and you didn't, and honestly I don't know *how* you function as a person, Rich, I really don't get you at all."

Richie grabs at his chest as if he's been shot, then flops back to lie across the countertop, whining. "Eds, how could you, how *could* you. Not when my health is so delicate. Oh, you cruel, cruel son of a bitch, how could you say something like that. I'll have you know I could've gone to college if I wanted to."

"And you didn't."

“And I didn’t.”

Eddie has moved from pots to plates now. He draws a sloppy smiley face on every single plate with the bottle of dish soap before slowly and methodically going at it with a sponge. For some reason this is the hottest thing Richie has ever seen in his entire life.

“You’re so fucking neurotic.” He gets off the counter and grabs a tea towel, thwacks Eddie’s back with it half-heartedly, and starts to dry the things in the dish rack. All the while, he watches Eddie clean plates. Like, it’s so stupid but it really does *do things* to him, his heart starts racing in his ribcage and everything, he can’t tear his eyes away, it’s so *absorbing*, the ritual of it, the childishness– it’s that, and the fucking Halloween socks. *God damn it, I am so whipped.* There’s a hole in the hem of the tea towel, it’s clearly been unravelling for a while. The clean tiled floor seems to tilt once he notices this, his head is swimming, there’s a sudden ache he can’t place.

And, he thinks, Eddie really is just *attractive*, there, sleeves rolled up so they don’t get caught in soapy water, flitting up to his tip-toes, face stony and serious in concentration, and Richie polishes a spoon very, very intensely, he still doesn’t know quite what to do with his hands. He just looks so young. Doesn’t just look it but *acts* it, talks faster and isn’t quite so set in himself yet and is only slightly more prone to actually being *nice*, presumably in that way that young adults are so desperate to act on their emotions before their twenties fall away. Eddie is very much twenty-six, and Richie really fucking *feels* forty, feels like his heart is sagging, though he knows it’s just the wiring of his neurons. For a long, horrible moment, he thinks about a body in the dark, holes eaten through the skin, rot creeping up well-manicured fingers. Eddie keeps scrubbing. It smells like dish soap.

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Richie’s in the bathroom brushing his teeth when he hears Eddie talking to someone rather urgently. He turns off the tap and listens through the door.

“Myra, I’m fine, I’m fucking– would you just listen to me?” A pause. He’s always more of an asshole over the phone. “No, I’m– this is a

work retreat, remember? Oh, no shit you're up late worrying, when aren't you. Myra. *Myra*. No, what did I just say, I said I'm fine, it's great, I'm not dying, Myra, would you fucking listen to a word I'm saying."

Richie honestly didn't know they had been together since 2002. There's a lot about Eddie he still doesn't really know. The biggest things, especially.

Absurdly, Richie's gaydar has historically been entirely fucking terrible, and that's just when it comes to strangers. Cardigans. Hypochondria. Red short-shorts in small-town America. And not one single goddamn clue, not in the decade they'd known each other. It had never even come up, not even when they were teenagers and it seemed like everyone at school was calling Richie gay except for Richie himself. Neither of them had ever dared to ask the other, not even kindly. Not even once.

It all starts to feel like wishful thinking, the idea that he can *fix this*, that someone, some higher power, is genuinely doing this benevolently. Maybe he's supposed to save Stan and Eddie, and that's all. Maybe he's not really meant to be okay at the end of this, maybe he'll never be happy, maybe Eddie will have three kids and never get divorced and eke out a deeply normal happy life, maybe this wasn't meant to give *him* a happy ending, anyway, why would he ever assume that? He didn't have the worst of it, after all. He didn't die.

*Are you there, god? Yeah, it's me, Richie. Go fuck yourself.*

Someone bangs on the bathroom door. "Richie?" It's Bill. "You didn't pass out or anything, did you? I— I gotta shower."

He snaps out of it, spits into the sink, splashes some water on his face for good measure. "Showering at night, what are you, a fucking serial killer?"

He goes back to the room and finds Eddie sitting cross-legged on his bed in his boxers and a tank top with his head in his hands, taking long, deep breaths. His phone's on the bedside table, and he's massaging his temples, and he turns sharply when the door creaks open, huffing.



“You good?” Richie asks quietly, sitting down on his own bed and watching Eddie’s face closely, fading from panicked to calm– or, at least, the pretence of calm.

“No, yeah, I’m fine. Just... work stuff.”

“Maybe this is gonna sound, just, entirely out of nowhere–”

“Everything you say these days is out of nowhere.”

Richie takes a slow breath. “You’re braver than you think, Eddie.”

Eddie just *looks* at him. “Fuck’s that supposed to mean, what is this, a Lifetime movie? *Braver than you think*, you are so goddamn weird, you know that?”

Richie gives a half-hearted shrug, and snorts, and pulls his blanket up over himself to hide the flush creeping up his neck. Worth a shot, wasn’t it?

Lights out.

Except, well, Richie can’t sleep. Of course he can’t. Eddie is out in what seems like seconds, and he sleeps like an actual insane person, breathing near-silently and lying perfectly straight with his hands folded neatly over his chest.

And by god, he looks like he’s dead. Not that Richie’s, like, actively attempting to watch him while he sleeps, but the moonlight falls right across Eddie’s face in a ghostly blue, lighting up the whole room, so it’s hard not to glance. He looks like he’s in a coffin, for fuck’s sake. *His* Eddie never got a coffin, not even the empty closed-casket ones you get when you can’t recover the body. His Eddie is still presumed missing, in the future; Myra doesn’t give up on his Eddie. His Eddie did not get a funeral, did not get a service or speeches or *closure*, his Eddie is in a cavern crushed by rubble and eaten by worms, his Eddie is rot, dirt, and blackening bone, his Eddie is gone, just gone, just gone.

And this Eddie sleeps like the dead.

He doesn’t want to be thinking about this. Not his Eddie, not his

timeline, not the body, not death or holes or scavengers. Instead he wonders. He hasn't seen that many time travel movies, mostly because they all suck, but the logic of all of this keeps nagging at him.

Any minute now, he could wake up and be forty again. Any second, now. Maybe he'll touch the wrong thing, cause the wrong butterfly effect, start World War Three. Maybe a black hole will swallow the earth because he fucked up something he didn't ever understand. Maybe he'll go back further, further, maybe he'll be sucked back into being a teenager, or a fetus, or nonexistence, or maybe he's not stuck in a dream but he's comatose, maybe he took too many sleeping pills and now he's dying on his living room floor and his brain is giving him one last chance to feel at peace before he goes, maybe that was the asthma attack. Maybe it's all just been one long vision of torment from that fucking clown, maybe he never left the deadlights, maybe he died in that cave, too.

Sometimes he wishes he'd died in that cave.

But he can't think about that now. He's tired of thinking of anything, tired of screwing his eyes shut so that he doesn't accidentally look at the way Eddie's shape is carved into his duvet, so that his eyes don't mistakenly fall over the curve of his Adam's apple, he's tired of being afraid. He figures that if he doesn't feel afraid anymore he'll stop knowing how to feel anything correctly. There's nothing for him here. This isn't a free future— it's torture porn, it's a bad dream, it's a calamity waiting to happen. It isn't safe, he thinks, he's never really felt safe. For a moment he thinks he sounds just like Eddie.

Ben's still awake, somehow, thumbing at a book by lamplight downstairs, feet dangling off the edge of the couch he's hastily arranged into somewhere he could theoretically sleep.

"Hey, Rich," he says quietly, yawning. "You need something?"

Richie furrows his eyebrows. "Yeah, man. Yeah. Sorry. Hey, d'you... want to switch with me?"

"What, rooms?" Ben looks at him quizzically. "You want to sleep on the couch?"

“...Yeah.”

Ben sits up, eyes kind, and pats the spot next to him. “Something on your mind? Wanna talk about it?”

“Nah, I just.” He stays standing. “If I wake up in the night or something, I don’t wanna bug Eddie. You know how he gets.”

“Richie, I’m worried about you,” Ben says, and it would be the sweetest thing in the world if it weren’t so *fucking* inconvenient right now. “Y’know, you can talk to any of us, about what’s going on. If anything’s going on.”

“Nothing’s going on.”

“If you’re sure.”

“Nothing’s going on.”

“Repeating it won’t make me believe you more,” Ben warns, but he gets up anyway and claps Richie on the shoulder. “It’s a shitty couch.”

“Of course it is.”

He sleeps on it anyway, scratchy embroidery and all, and has dreams that he can’t understand.

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## V. Great Sacandaga Lake

The next day they go to the beach at the lake after lunch to talk strategy and ruin Bill’s aunt’s fancy bath towels.

“Welcome to Operation Nobody Fucking Dies,” Richie proclaims, to zero applause.

It’s a clear day, this whole summer’s been clear days, sky the colour

of cornflowers, sun a big ripe mandarin orange just hanging there. Bev's hair is alight, and Bill's eyes are very green, and Eddie's swatting at horse flies, skin ruddy with sunscreen. The lake is still and entirely silver. The beach is the only one they found within walking distance that isn't crawling with other families with lake houses, and it's a long, quiet stretch of fine sand that peters off in the distance towards Mayfield.

Richie's standing with his back to the water, and the others are sitting circled around him, and oddly it feels like he's about to give the world's most depressing TED talk. He still does not have a plan, and he still feels fit to burst from anxiety after last night– and after Eddie's been giving him the cold shoulder all morning. That's fine, though, it's all fine, he did the right thing–

“So you've been having visions,” Bev prompts, snapping him out of his thoughts. “Of a bad future.”

“Right!” Richie says with a lazy grin. “Okay, buckle up, assholes. So I get this vision, right, I'm lying in bed at home, hungover like crazy.”

Bill sticks up his hand like he's still in grade school, what a loser. “I thought you were in Portland?”

“Oh! Yeah.” *Jesus Christ, get your shit together.* “No, fuck, yeah, sorry. I'm in a hotel in Portland for a show. I'm in bed, cozy as fuck, nothing more bougie than a Best Western, and then everything... goes black.” Richie is a pretty okay comedian, but he's a pretty terrible fucking actor. “And then I see stuff. Bad stuff.”

Eddie glares. “Get to the point, jackass.”

“And the stuff was...” Richie trails off, remembering. “It was... We're in this... cavern. And we're all, like, forty. And we're in this cavern.”

And they're in this cavern.

“And it's back, and that's why we're there, and– and Ben's all hot now,” and it's like the words fall out of his mouth without agency, they're barely his words, “but that doesn't fix anything, and Mike's been in that fucking library his whole life, his *whole life*. And Bill

never gets over it, and Bev– and Bev keeps getting hurt by people, that doesn't stop, and Eddie's... And it's under the barrens... and we're in this cavern..."

Everything goes black for everyone.

And they're in this cavern.

Bev sees Sharpie scrawled on the bathroom stall slicking with blood and starts to choke, the world slicking, the world down to an inch of air, now, scrabbling for something to hold with wrists that ache too much where they've bruised, and someone is hammering at the door and it's all she can do to keep screaming–

Mike thinks the sky's falling, it smells all like swamps and sewer water and bodies, the rocks are slick and green in the light that hurts to look at, he's holding something he doesn't recognize, he's in a body he doesn't recognize, and there's that– his great white fucking whale, there's that huge–

Bill's in his old basement, he's staring at his young self staring at Georgie, eyes big and bright, eyes big and bright. He doesn't know why but his body is wracked with guilt, more guilt than what's normal, for him, the water's heavy up to his knees, and only then does he notice the wedding ring–

Ben's in the warm brown earth, unfamiliar muscles taut, body buried and crushed, and he's alone, just like he's always been, most of him collapsing. Some small part of him, though, is the most comfortable it's ever been, letting the earth crumble, finally at peace, slipping away in that way he always knew he would, never to be seen again–

Eddie can't breathe at all. There's a hole in him. He can only smell the dark.

And almost as quickly as it began it's over, and Richie blinks and the sun hits him and it hurts, everyone's wincing and gasping and reaching for each other. He saw everything, felt what everyone else has just felt. But Stan's cross-legged and just staring at him, expressionless.

“W-w-what the *fuck* was that,” Bill heaves.

Eddie is clutching at his chest, taking choked breaths, eyes wide as moons. “Jesus fucking Christ what did you fucking do to me Richie Tozier I swear to god I feel like I’m fucking dying can someone please just get me a beer and don’t you look at me like that because that was FUCKED, Richie, what did you do, what the fuck did you do. Why does my. Jesus why does my chest feel like. Like.” He peters out. Bev hands him a can and he chugs all of it in one go.

“I swear I don’t know what the fuck that was,” Richie says truthfully, still just standing there, not knowing what to do with his hands. “I mean. I mean. It was a vision. Right. We all just had. Visions. Right?”

Everyone nods, even Stan, who’s got the strangest look on his face. Eddie says, “I fucking hate magic.”

“So you believe me now?” Richie sits down on Bev’s towel. “We can’t let that happen to us. Whatever we have to do. Maybe it’s personal, maybe it’s not. Whatever your whole thing is. Okay?”

They don’t talk about it. Mostly they’re all still processing. Bev brings out a pack of cards and ropes everyone into playing Crazy Eights with her, but Stan stands up abruptly.

“Hey, Rich,” he says out of the corner of his mouth. “There’s... well, this is embarrassing. There’s actually an impressive range of birds that come to roost around here, I was gonna go try to find some if I can before the sun sets, I just think I might get lost. Come with me.” It’s an order, not a request.

Some cat is out of the bag, he presumes, so he says, “Okay,” and tries not to panic.

They haven’t even been walking along the lake for three minutes when Stan stops in his tracks, turns around, and says, “So why don’t you tell me what the fuck is going on.” There’s a hanging silence. “Because I didn’t see shit, okay. I didn’t see anything. I thought you were all screwing with me. But you weren’t. And I didn’t see shit, alright. And I feel like maybe you’ve got something to do with it.”

Richie feels sick. “I don’t know—”

“You’ve been acting weird around me, Richie, and weirder than usual, which is really saying something. What am I, made of glass? You’re... you’re freaking me out, man.”

Richie sighs, and balls his fists, and sits down on the sand. Stan sits, too, and they look at the lake. “You’re too fuckin’ smart for your own good, you know that?”

“Ha.”

“It’s just funny, too, because you were the smartest, but you always had the lamest fear. I mean a fucking *painting*, literally just a weird lady with a fucked up face, you are so lucky.”

“Lucky?” Stan splutters. “You bitch.”

“I mean, we all definitely had worse fears than you,” Richie continues, “really, like, Bev’s was *fountains of fucking Carrie blood*. Eddie’s was of basically the whole idea of dying horribly of illness because he is *normal*, that’s a normal fear to have. Bill’s was his dead brother as a zombie. And Mike’s was of his *family* getting *burned to death*.” He lets that sit. “And yours was a *painting*.”

“Okay but—”

“*But* you roasted your entire congregation at *your own Bar Mitzvah*, Stanley! I mean, really, talk about *becoming a man*, like, talk about *righteous Jewish anger*, talk about the most baller thing I’ve ever seen in my life, and somehow you can’t handle Picasso’s most annoying dried-out cumstain? Bull fucking shit,” he says, somehow he’s actually shouting, because it’s Stan, because Stan’s his best friend, he’s the smartest person he knows, he does Sudoku for fun and goes *bird-watching* and has had a running mental numbered list of his top ten Bath & Body Works candle scents for decades, because god damn it it’s *Stan*, “y’know? Like, bull fucking *shit* you die at the end of this.”

There’s a long and sorry silence. The wind is up, and it’s pulling at the water, it’s lapping at the shore. “I what?” Stan’s voice is faint.

*Shit.* “Okay. I never said anything.” *Shit, shit, shit.* “You’re going to

think I'm fucking insane."

"I think my logic-brain got thoroughly fucked back when we killed a magic clown that gave half of us chronic nightmare visions, but thanks." Stan gives him a sympathetic smile. "Pretty sure I trust your particular brand of crazy, Rich. Especially after all that."

"Okay. Okay, fuck. Don't freak out. I'm... from... the future," Richie starts, haltingly. It never gets any easier. It still sounds so fucking dumb. "Fifteen years from now. I know. Bullshit, right? Yeah, that's what I thought. I was hiding it, and I'm sorry, and Bev knows and... and I'm from... a *bad* future, the stuff I know, the visions, they aren't lies, and I got sent back here, to, to— I don't know, I don't fucking know... You don't have to believe me, but I wouldn't lie about this shit. Swear to fucking god, on *your* god, man, I just." He steals a look at Stan, who's frowning, whose eyes are calculating, "...And in my future, you died."

"Wow. Well, okay. Jeez, okay. That explains things." The sound of waves. He's being very normal about a very not-normal thing, which is *so like him*. "Okay. How do I go?"

"You believe me."

"Yeah, do I get my head bit off? Do I fall down a hole in the floor and break my spine? Does *it* grab a glock and headshot me, what?" He laughs, but stops short, studying Richie's face. "What? Why are you looking at me like that?"

How could he say it? "Stan, you... It's just. Shit. It's hard to really say, man."

"Would you just tell me?"

"*Stan.*"

"I kill myself, don't I?"

He says it quickly, toneless, unafraid. Richie's heart drops. *Be brave*. "...Yeah. Yeah, Stan. That's what happens."

"I learn about it coming back, and I figure I'm already a lost cause, so



I...”

“Yeah.”

“Well, that makes sense.” Stan’s looking out at the lake. He doesn’t sound angry, or even very sad about it. Just... passive, as passive as you can be about your own death. “That makes a *type* of sense. I mean, when you called me I felt... something similar, maybe. Just—pure rollercoaster-scared, like— like maybe I should just turn on an intercom and yell at the operator to get me the fuck off this ride.”

“You don’t seem freaked out, fuck’s the matter with you?”

“I’m just not surprised. In the back of my mind. I think maybe I’ve always... known.” He smiles, he actually *smiles* at that. “Okay! Well, good to know. Won’t be committing suicide any time soon. Cooooool.”

“Eddie dies too,” Richie blurts out before he can stop himself, and Stan winces. “He— he sacrifices himself, it’s really... it’s not great.”

“...Oh.”

“Yeah.” A long pause, like they’re having a long-overdue moment of silence.

“Are you... uh.” Stan’s tapping his finger incessantly on his knee. “Uh. *Hm.*”

“Am I what, Stan.”

“Well, I don’t want to pry.”

“Am I fucking *what.*”

Stan puts his hand on Richie’s upper arm, gives him a look. “You’re in love with him, right?”

“Man, *fuck* you.”

“It’s not that it’s obvious.”

“Oh, here we go.”

“I’m *sorry*,” Stan says, chillingly sincere. “Rich, I’m sorry that *happened to you*, dickhead. I’m sorry you’ve had to go through this, this whole time, it’s just, that isn’t *fair*. And I mean, I mean time travel, too, all this magic bullshit, I couldn’t even *imagine* how *I’d* feel. It’s not fair to you, you know, after everything.”

Richie’s a little stunned. They’re still looking right in each other’s eyes, and it’s uncomfortable, it’s dizzying, it’s horrible. He feels like he’s turned up to a show naked, like he forgot there was a test today, like he’s on an operating table and somebody’s slicing him up. “I... yeah, I know.”

There’s a moment of quiet, and Stan finally wrenches his gaze away, watching a couple of geese paddle the lake in the middle distance. “You know what this all *means*, though, right?”

“What?”

“Bet on the Super Bowl every year until you catch up; you’ll make bank.”

“Jesus fucking christ, Stan.”

“I’m *kidding!*” They’re both laughing now, god, Richie’s *missed* him. “What I mean is there’s still. Time. I mean, if you were sent back for something. You get a *whole extra life*. Who wouldn’t kill for that?”

“Being the Terminator is harder than you’d think, man.”

“Well, you’ve already saved my life,” Stan says, so casually that Richie could almost cry. Instead, he leans his head against Stan’s shoulder as they’re sat there on the sand. In a smaller voice, Stan murmurs, “Thanks for that.”

“Hey, no problem.”

“But we still need to talk about Eddie.”

Richie groans for an extra-long time, because that sort of conversation is extra-horrifying to him, and he is extra-not ready for

this, not at all, not with Stan of all people. “What’s there to say.”

“I had to deal with you and Eddie mooning over each other for my entire fucking teenage life, asshat, what do you think.”

Richie feels a flush creeping up his neck. His breath hitches. *Not possible*, he thinks, *it’s not possible, nothing in this world will ever be fair*. All he can say is, “Me and Eddie do not *moon*.”

“Well, *you moon*,” Stan says with a grin. “You know you moon.”

“I moon inwardly.”

“That’s still mooning.”

“Not the fucking *point*, Stan,” he snaps, chest tight with guilt. “Because– because Eddie has a girlfriend, okay? Jesus, fuck. What am I gonna do, fucking, homewreck? And I mean I don’t even know if he’s– if he’s–”

“...European?”

“Stop being funny right now, Stanley Uris, you’re not allowed to be funny.” It’s pretty fucking funny, though.

Stan makes a pensive face. “You know Kafka wrote this aphorism once.”

“Oh, *Kafka*.” Said with derision, but only because Richie doesn’t actually know who Kafka is.

Stan ignores him. “And it goes, ‘*In the struggle between yourself and the world, hold the world’s coat.*’”

“Well, that makes perfect sense.” He kicks at the sand. “Thanks, Kafka. Thanks for absolutely nothing, jackass.”

“It means you should be *happy*, Richie,” Stan says with a quiet sincerity. “Look– someone, somewhere, wants you to be happy. That has to be what this means. It has to. You can’t movie-reference your way out of this because you shouldn’t *need* to, you can’t pick a fight with god. And now you don’t have to anymore. You get to rewrite

your own life! Whatever happens, happens, man. Eddie's his own person, he'll do what he wants, you know that. But that doesn't mean you can't find your own happiness, you know?"

"Wow. You should be a motivational speaker," Richie deadpans.

"Jackass."

"You think," he says, fumbles for the words. It's growing darker, sky going from a pale blue to a dusky, clear indigo. "You really think Eddie might..."

"I remember that much." Stan smiles and nudges Richie's arm. "Hey, you know what, I remember this one time, we were like fifteen and we went on a field trip to that science museum, you know, the one with the planetarium on the top floor? And they did this space show, or something, where the room went pitch black and they projected this movie onto the ceiling— remember that big domed ceiling?— which showed this huge map of the solar system, and it flew around all the stars with this big booming narration and it made half the class feel sick because it was going so fast. And I fucking hated it, I was having a minor panic attack because thinking about space makes me anxious, I just wanted to go look at rocks, but I do remember, distinctly, this one thing. You and Eddie were sitting next to each other, obviously, hitting each other and making, y'know, a general sort of ruckus, and then the narrator says, I mean, it sounded so fucking stupid at the time, he says, "Mankind's final frontier is not outer space— it is, in a sense, ourselves. Our search for life is not a search for the other; it's a search for a mirror. All we want is for our own insides to be knowable.""

"How do you *remember* that?"

"Threshold of revelation, fucking shut up, I'm not finished. And you say, "*Pussy, the final frontier*," in your worst loudest voice, and Eddie says, "*Pussy, the final frontier*," at the exact same time, somehow even louder."

"What is this moral supposed to even be."

"And anyway, one of the volunteer parent chaperones kicks you two

out of the room, and I'm just happy because I can leave discreetly at the same time and I don't have to keep thinking about the heat death of the universe, and I steer you guys to the geology section, and you turn to Eddie and say, "You ever want to go to space, Eds?", and he says, "Pretty sure if I was even in the vicinity of a spaceship I'd have a conniption," and you say, "Nah, you'd just miss me too much." And you've both entirely forgotten about me, and I just watch, and Eddie says, "You'd miss *me* too much if you were on a spaceship," and you say, "I'd miss your mom's sloppy handjobs," and he says, "But really, you'd miss me," and you say, "Course I would," and then I say, "You guys *could* just get on a spaceship *together*," and then you both shout—

"GO SUCK ROCKS," Richie finishes for him, remembering, more than anything astonished he even *can* remember that.

"And that's when I knew."

"What?"

Stan grins. "I think you know what I mean."

And he does. Their whole walk back along the beach, when Bill stutters through ordering pizza, when Mike manages to start up the VHS player and only finds boxsets of *Seinfeld* in the cupboard, when Bev's pouring cherry wine and when Eddie's yelling at everyone to get their shoes *the fuck* off the couch and Stan somehow gets Ben to read out the poems he wrote when he was thirteen and they all have a good laugh about it, Richie knows, and he *knows* he knows, and that makes all the difference in the world.

When everyone else is traipsing upstairs or downstairs to go to bed, and Ben's in the bathroom, Eddie rounds on Richie in the den, putting on his stupid, deathly attractive angry face, and says, "So what the fuck is up with you?"

Richie briefly feels like that thing in anime where question marks start physically manifesting above your head, before he remembers. "You mean, other than the traumatizing death visions."

"I mean," Eddie says with a glare, "why did you tiptoe off in the

middle of the night and go sleep on the couch, you think I'm gonna bite your dick off or something? 'Cause I'm not."

Richie softens in a horrible, heart-lurching way. "I just thought that if I freaked out in the middle of the night I might wake you up." He frowns. "And I snore."

"I know you snore, jackass, we've had sleepovers, I'm a heavy sleeper anyway."

"Just didn't want to bug you, man."

"You don't need to worry so much," Eddie snaps. "I know that sounds like bullshit from me but you're being *so fucking weird*."

"Maybe I've just changed in the last decade."

Eddie looks up at him. "Yeah, well, asshole, you can sleep in a real bed and let Ben have a turn destroying his back on that shitty couch, you know you should really go to a chiropractor. You slump."

"Aw, you do care." Richie's heart is melting, though, which he finds stupid. Fucker tells him he *slumps* and he gets butterflies.

Maybe he does moon. Eddie says, "And anyway Ben drools in his sleep which is about four hundred times more intolerable than snoring."

Ben, who has just exited the bathroom, calls out a desperate "I'm sorry!" from the hallway. Richie and Eddie both just turn to each other and start cackling before finally heading to their room, where they both fall asleep quickly and quietly, in separate beds, and it's like everything's changed. Though, of course, nothing has.

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In a dream, Beverly sees nothing. And then, the world.

She's floating in deep space, aimless, it's neither cold nor hot, neither

light nor dark; it's just an endless nothing, and the sound of her heartbeat. It isn't anything like her usual dreams, no blurry visions, nobody grabbing at her arms, no noises, no screaming.

Then she sees the eye. It's like a sun, like a planet, it's the size of... she can't think of what it could be the size of. It takes up her entire frame of vision, the eye, chlorophyll-green and lined with river veins and ringed with light. Three lights, swimming, reflected in the shine of the iris. She can only see the eye, not any body it's attached to, it's that huge. The pupil, blacker than black, fixates on her, and it's like every alien story, it's sucking her in, drawing her closer. It blinks, slow, so slow it's mesmerizing. This isn't linear, she's distinctly outside of the way she knows time should bend, she knows if she stays here too long some knot will untangle, some rope will fray.

Absurdly, looking at the eye, she thinks it might look reptilian, some massive unknowable creature, some incomprehensible being. And in a hot flash she feels as if, somehow, it knows her. And she knows it.

"Can you hear me? I don't know if you can hear me." She feels insane, but the words fall out of her mouth anyway. The sound vibrations thrum, overwhelmingly loud. "Could you... do something for me? God, I sound like an idiot. Do you do favours? You don't do favours, who am I kidding. I just... I have to try. If you can hear anything I'm saying, if you're able, if you're out there... Just this once, could you... I have this friend. And I think you know him. And I think you've already been helping him."

Behind her, abstractly, she thinks she can hear something gasping for breath. The sound of earth. A terrible void, eating.

"It's just not fair, what happened to him. It isn't right, and you know that, don't you? The scales were tipped too far one way. And the world fell on him, you know, and I think maybe you could... I don't know, help him more, change one more thing, one more small thing. One more life caught in the lights. He deserves this, more than anything, they both do. If deserving matters here. If there's anything left you could do. I love him so much, both of them, so dearly. They deserve this, something circular, you know, whole. Something's wrong, something's off, where I'm from, someone's missing. One more life. Just one."

The eye blinks again, agonizing. The lights keep swimming in the periphery, closer, closer, tangling. A voiceless thing speaks. Tangling. The sound of earth. The smell of rot. Here is a way to survive. Here is the way we breathe. Here– something small crying out to be touched.

The calm, slow spin of the universe. A loose thread, dangling.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Hey, friends. Hope this didn't take too long, my momentum's kinda all over the place (and, like, I'm busy! haha). The final part may also take a couple weeks, fwiw. Much love to all of you, and again, let me know what you think in the comments!!

Chapter title is from Oceanographer's Choice by The Mountain Goats. You can find me on tumblr at ofmissing; I promise I am very entertaining over there. Love you!



### 3. PART THREE: i'm not fucking around (i want to be well!)

#### VI. Mayfield

On a mid-morning Skittles run at Mayfield's only corner store, Richie feels timespace bend.

It's funny, because for once it doesn't fill him with inescapable asthmatic dread. But he knows the signs now— the drop in his blood pressure, the little fuzzing corners of his vision, the sudden loudness of wind on water. He looks around and privately wonders whether he should dip outside and sit with his head in his knees for a while when the little bells on the door chime with movement. And there's a kid, there. Really just some kid, couldn't be more than eight or nine. Staring right at him, normal and silent, emanating an inexplicable important-seeming aura.

"Sir," says the kid, with the quietest, littlest voice, eyes big and wide, colours sort of going all wavy, "do you know if they've got popsicles here?"

Richie just wants to know why this kid, of all kids, looks like he's a glitch in the matrix, or that thing that happens in bad movies where a character gets high or something and suddenly the world's all rainbow-drenched and everybody's forgotten how to talk. "It's not lunch yet," he says stupidly.

"You're eating Skittles before lunch?"

What an asshole. Richie points him down to the back of the store. He totters to the freezer, careless. *Something's wrong with this picture.*

"Kid, hey," he calls out, feeling a horrible sense of déjà vu, "are you... feeling okay?"

He swivels, hand still in the freezer, grasping. "Think so." He retrieves a Klondike bar.

"Thought you were getting a popsicle."

"Mama says I shouldn't talk to strangers," the kid says with a measured stare. "Not where I'm from, she says."

The cashier isn't around. *Smoke break, I guess*, Richie thinks, as he asks almost automatically, "And where's that, buddy?"

"I'm from Derry, mister. That's in Maine." He says it so matter-of-factly one could almost believe it isn't a death sentence.

Richie feels very cold, though the fans in here are all broken and it's hot as balls out. There's that tightness in his chest, there's that ache. His head begins to pound. An eerie silence falls, and for a moment all they can hear is the sound of the freezer *drip-drip*-dripping in the back. And then Richie remembers something deeply, deeply terrible. "Swear on Barney's grave I'm not a creep, kid," he chokes out. "Just. Just tell me. Humour me, man. What's- uh- what's your name?"

The kid looks very solemn in his little Gap Kids button-down and bright yellow cargo shorts. He seems to grasp something he shouldn't be able to, for someone so young, for someone *so young*. "Adrian, mister." His eyes wide as moons. "My name's Adrian."

*And you're shining like a new-cracked glowstick.* "Okay. Well, hey there, Adrian. I'm Richie," Richie says through the growing lump in his throat, through a tongue gone bone-dry. "Richie Tozier."

"Okay."

*Alright, God, you slimy asshole bastard. How the fuck do I save the kid,* Richie thinks. And isn't this funny. Isn't this *grand*. What cosmic *bullshit*. How could he possibly think to stop the dog from dying at the end. How could he presume to fix anything, from this one ridiculous point in space and time where everything's converging, how could he be expected to figure this out all on his own. In a world so rotten to the core.

He's so very small- the kid who's meant to die, who spurs the story forward, the cheap bait, the tragedy. No amount of pep talks or cryptic warnings would serve, here, no amount of morally reasonable advice, not anything. This life was never *ever* his to save, it isn't like he *knew* the guy, Mike had told them about it once and pointed out a

couple of articles but it had always felt like too much to bear, so soon after, to consider it any more than unfortunate collateral damage, to feel any amount of agency. The wound was too raw, or it wasn't quite the right time, or it was just the forward rolling of a world too far tilted to kill with childish insults. Then again the days are already gone, and there's the kid, alive and bug-eyed and cradled by time.

"If I can give you any advice." Richie puts the Skittles back on the shelf. "You need to get the fuck out of Derry."

His head is splitting. He hears the little bells chiming, but doesn't look behind him when he leaves.

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## VII. The House on Priddle Point Rd.

"You feeling okay?"

Eddie looks at Bev with something that looks a little like fear, or maybe that's just always been Eddie's face. "What, do I not look okay?"

They're sat on the patio overlooking the lake cradling Bloody Marys at far too early in the day, but Ben and Bill and Mike are all out hiking, and Richie's gone who-knows-where, and Stan's in bed with a migraine, so Beverly's here, and god damn it she's going to grill this poor man the way Richie never could.

"No, you look fine," she says casually, calmly. "I'm just asking to ask."

"Well, good, because I'm fine." Eddie taps his finger on the glass of the table. "I'm completely fine."

"You weren't fine yesterday," Bev ventures, downing the rest of her drink. "On the beach. With your vision. It seemed like it was a lot worse on you than it was for the rest of us." She pauses, trying to be gentle. "I'll tell you mine first if you won't say. I was— god, what a

stupid thing, it's so ham-fisted and ridiculous, but, I was drowning in *blood*." She lets herself laugh at it, doesn't want to think about the implications because she'd probably get very angry. "Was yours... was yours like that?"

Eddie looks very determinedly at his feet. "So you know how I'm deathly allergic to wasps?"

"Not really."

"Well, I'm allergic to wasps," he says grandly, "and once, when I was, like, ten, I got stung. Three at a time, I don't know, I guess I was eating some fruit and they smelled it on me. I was with Richie and Bill, we hadn't met Stan yet, I don't think, not at that young. Anyway I got stung. I don't even remember why, or how, just that the sun was so bright I must've walked right on top of a nest. I mean, I collapsed and started, fuckin', foaming at the mouth or whatever, and Bill carried me all the way back across the field and flagged down a car that could take us to Derry General. Richie lost his mind, obviously, but Bill just kept carrying me. And by the time we got to the hospital I'd been legally dead for three minutes." He takes a sip and screws up his face. "I didn't see anything, Bev. Maybe there was a smell, maybe some— I don't know, muffled sounds. But it felt just like that. Like—like being dead." He's got this incredulous tiny smile on his face like he can't quite believe it either.

Beverly looks at him, nose and cheeks outlined in the white gleam of sunlight, the lake blurring into the trees past him, past the balcony. He looks resigned, too; there are frown lines on his cheeks now, he seems angry in a way completely separate from his precocious frustration at thirteen. She remembers floating, and pale, pale eyes. "In that way you can't describe, right?"

"In that way that isn't really a *way*," he counters. "It just wasn't *anything*. Void. The dark. Nothing, nada, nil."

"I understand," Bev lies, with a pit in her stomach. It's just... it's so very cruel. They sit there and keep drinking, in the quiet, trees rustling in the gentle tug of the wind.

"Does something seem strange about Richie to you?" Eddie blurts out

suddenly. "He's been acting so fucking weird, and I– I don't know, it's like." He takes a breath. "God this is stupid. It's probably nothing, just. Maybe I'm going insane. It's like– there's a wall between us. He just seems so closed-off, and. Different. I don't know. Not like I remember him," he says, eyes flitting sideways, "not like I expected him to be."

*Interesting.* And terrible, too. "How do you mean?"

He frowns. "I don't– *fuck me*, how do I describe this in a way that isn't ridiculous. Richie is like, well, you know. Nobody else in the world. Always has been. And it was always me-and-him, Eddie-and-Richie, it was always us." He looks at Bev, wide-eyed, almost scared. "Something must have... happened, right? *Right?* Something terrible? And now he's not... he's..."

"I don't understand."

"Have you noticed," Eddie says slowly, "how tired his eyes are?"

Beverly bites her lip. "Eddie."

"It's like," he mutters without pausing, like he's telling her a secret, "like he's not even the same person at all." The wind dies, and there's something so awful about the way his voice falls in the flat air. "Like he's an alien or something, just pretending to be Richie. And now I don't know. We were so close. Like, like he was all I had, and I was all he had, and that was okay, and now I don't know anymore, like, what the fuck, is it– is it *me*?" He's breathing hard. "Did *I* change? I remember– I remember– it was always–"

She takes Eddie by the wrist and tugs at him, and they look one another in the eyes, and she says, "Spit it out," and he inhales deeply and doesn't break the gaze.

"I think the Richie I thought I knew is gone," he murmurs. A bird calls out, somewhere. "And it's the worst fucking feeling in the world."

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Things continue to fall apart.

Like, literally, Richie is seeing things he shouldn't, all the way back to Priddle Point. The trees bend and sway and go purple sometimes. The sunlight fractures wrong. His head feels like it's about to explode; he's had hangover headaches before but this is something incredibly different.

For a split second, he hears the familiar creak of a ceiling fan. His ceiling fan, the one at home. He leans against a streetlamp, grips the cold metal just to feel something and tries to stay on the ground. Then he's in a cavern. Then it smells like blood. Then he sees white, just white, something endless. He punches the lamp pole, bloodies his knuckles, and the street stutters back into view, and he stumbles on forward.

It's just so fucking unfair. When things had been going so well.

Somehow, worlds flitting back and forth, he makes it back to the house; he sort of clips through the door in a way that makes his stomach roll, and he collapses all sort of everywhere on the couch, cradling his head in his hands. His vision's too spotty; he can't call out, his tongue's gone dry. Three lights, swimming. Maybe he should have eaten those Skittles.

It's hard to even think. He grabs a notebook— maybe it's one of Bill's— from the coffee table and starts to write, whatever he can think up. He's beginning to feel like something terrible is about to happen.

The patio door slides open and Bev skids into the living room and makes a pained noise and kneels to move the hair out of his face. Eddie pads after her, his face nothing but a blur in the edge of Richie's vision.

“Fuck's going on, what happened to you, you look like *hell*—”

And then the front door opens and the guys come tumbling in, so conveniently back from their hike, dripping sweat and wearing wide smiles, and then Richie can vaguely hear Stan coming down the stairs

and mumbling about the noise, and then everyone's making concerned sounds and crowding the couch, all their faces wide like moons, and someone's put a wet towel to Richie's head, and then—

The world flashes in all the colours of an oil spill, and the ceiling pings out of place, huge chunks of tile teleporting a few feet up into the air, all geometric, like a computer glitch, and Richie thinks it's something only he can see until the others all scream. Then the roof slots back into place with a shuddering noise, but everything in the house starts going fuzzy.

“WHAT THE FUCK WAS THAT WHAT THE HELL IS HAPPENING.”

The wind's roaring, a sudden summer storm. Richie can barely keep his eyes open. “Eds,” he gasps out, “*stop fucking screaming.*”

“I'll do what the fuck I want, dickwad, what the hell is all this, am I. Oh my god I think my. Do you see this, my fingernails keep changing length, *are you looking at this right now.*”

“Richie,” Beverly presses, leaning down. Sky through the window tinting lime green. “Richie, are you doing this. Please tell me you know something. What the fuck is going on.”

“Great question, Nancy Drew.”

A glass on the coffee table becomes a mug. Ben jumps like a jackrabbit. Mike looks panicked, and says, “Oh god, I think— it has to be— something has to be wrong with the time stream.” Then he looks very guilty as everyone turns to stare at him.

“Time stream?” Bill murmurs incredulously into the silence. “F-f-fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“What did you do?” Mike asks, ignoring him, as Eddie and Ben also look fit to explode. “Richie? What did you *do*?”

Richie's heart is thudding out of his chest. Everything goes cyan, then yellow, then black and white. “How the fuck should I know, I didn't do *anything*, nothing changed, *I don't know what the fuck is happening.*”

“Oh god,” Stan says, pacing. “Oh god.”

“What the hell is– are you– *a time stream?*” Eddie’s gone pale, he’s running his hands through his hair, he’s struggling to breathe. “You’re fucking with me, you’re not saying– that you– that you–” He trails off, staring with horror at Richie as everything bends.

“Oh, you’re not gonna fucking believe this, Eds,” Richie says dreamily, a little too loud, as his muscles all seize up and his ears block up like his plane’s taking off. He lifts his hand, the one without a scar, holds it out like he’s warding off a curse. And he’s cruising at altitude, he’s up in the atmosphere, he’s watching all of this unfold from the big wide windows of a spaceship drawn in crayon, “but where we’re going... we don’t need... roads...”

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## I. 2017 – Chicago

It all feels so still.

Everything, all of it. Plants rustling, breathing shallow green breaths into the flat air– and Richie, there, lying in a heap on his living room floor, dry heaving and scrabbling at the carpet for a soft place to land.

*No no no no no no no–*

Bud Lite on the countertop. Bags under his eyes. The crushing silence of the middle of the night. His muscles are seized, and as his eyes adjust to the harsh yellow light his chest is racked with sobs. And he cries, there, curled in a ball, like a stupid goddamn child. And he feels... so alone. Just alone, and that’s all. There’s just nothing. It’s two in the morning in Chicago, and Eddie and Stan are dead, again.

Because, Christ, it could’ve all been a dream. His brain’s frenzied reaction to too many sleeping pills, just a fucked up stupid half-coma nightmare, a little residual trauma from the world’s shittiest childhood. Just his body torturing itself, over and over, because it feels like that’s all it knows how to do anymore, *Richie Tozier, This Is*



*Your Life– Or It Could Have Been, Maybe, But You Know You’ve Never Had That Sort Of Luck.*

But he remembers Eddie’s face. The shock, the fear, the way his neurons had so visibly clicked into place, and in that split second he’d lost him, he lost him *again*, it would almost be *better* if it had all been a dream because somehow he couldn’t find the initiative to fix things without screwing something important up, and this time it was all on him. No stupid clown, no Bowers watching and waiting, just Richie, fucking it up, and fucking it up with hindsight on his side.

*Should’ve just gotten therapy, jackass. Should’ve taken more pills, should’ve gone through with it, you coward, you fucking coward.* But he remembers Bev, her head on his shoulders. Stan pointing at ducks. Things had been going so well. If not with Eddie, who was just too young, their lives too cosmically different– it would never have worked, and Richie understands that, somewhere, abstractly. But the rest of them, their easy smiles, their kindness– all of it stuck in a youth he never got to live. Some fucking second chance.

There’s a hole in him again, burnt black and smouldering, he’s empty as empty gets. He heaves and finally manages to catch his breath and pulls himself into an unsteady sitting position. “The fuck just happened,” he pants at his potted fern, swaying slightly on top of a set of drawers. The fern says nothing, because it’s a fern. “Fuck off, man.”

Everything inhales. Everything swells. He sobs again and punches the wall. It doesn’t crack, but the skin of his knuckles scrapes off against the plaster.

As if in response, the carpet under him splits and swallows him whole.

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**VII. 2002 – The House on Priddle Point Rd.**

"CAN SOMEONE PLEASE JUST TELL ME WHAT THE *FUCK* JUST HAPPENED."

Beverly's about to go completely goddamn ballistic if everybody doesn't shut up in the next six seconds, but at least the ground's stopped shaking. "*Eddie.*"

"TIME STREAM? WHAT THE HELL DO YOU MEAN, *TIME STREAM?* ARE YOU *FUCKING KIDDING ME?*"

"EDDIE GOD DAMN IT LET ME EXPLAIN," Bev snaps, and Eddie glowers, but he nods and steps back, and she sighs and droops to sit at the foot of the couch where Richie is still passed out. The others sit down too, on the carpet, circled around her like they're doing show-and-tell. "Fuck. Alright. This is going to sound very, *very* silly and stupid, but it isn't like Pennywise The Dancing Clown is the pinnacle of realistic childhood experiences and I need *none* of you to interrupt me right now, please, oh my god." She's still thinking about her conversation with Eddie. *The worst fucking feeling in the world.*

"Bev," Ben says, gently, with worry in his eyes. "Guys, look at Richie's hand." And they do, they all watch as a white scar grows and gleams on his unmoving palm before their eyes.

Bill murmurs, "Jesus."

"There's... a lot we didn't tell you," she starts, haltingly, everyone now fallen serious and silent. "When we called. When we asked you to come here. Last week Richie fell onto my porch." With eyes like a zombie's. "And... he said he was forty. He was from the year 2017. A timeline where they'd killed it. But... other things had gone wrong. We never figured out why it happened, but— but he just *appeared*, and he couldn't go back, and so he thought we could... we could try to make some things right." Eddie's eyebrows are furrowed, his eyes are calculating. "We told Mike, but that was it, we didn't want to freak anybody out, we didn't want to ruin our chances." She swallows. "I guess time stopped wanting him around." *One more life.*

"Time travel," mutters Ben, amazed. "Fucking time travel."

Bev is just trying to keep it together, because it has been an

altogether horrible morning. She wonders where Richie is, if he's back home, entirely alone, or if he's off somewhere else, with another Beverly, or another Eddie, she wonders if he'll get to try again. "Yeah. You know with magic, how you can just... tell? If someone's bullshitting? He wasn't. I *know* he wasn't."

"You were right, that does sound stupid," Eddie says, and they all laugh. "But yeah. Yeah, I get what you mean."

Stan's had his eyes closed, like he's been praying. "So who's Richie now? The one in that body?"

"Well, if he has the scar again," Mike says, "I'd have to assume that's our Richie. The one from our timeline, the normal one."

"...*Our* Richie?" Eddie looks squeamish. "Time travel. Okay, time travel. I feel like I'm going insane."

There's a sudden grunt and they all swivel. Big brown cow eyes, wide and shining. Richie blinks with his long eyelashes and groans, then jumps and scrambles back, back against the cushions. "Holy *shit*. Holy shit where am I."

"Richie," Eddie breathes, and he maneuvers around Bev to get to him. "You asshole."

Richie just stares. "Assh— What the hell is going on— *Eddie?* Jes— Oh, Jesus, *okay*, that's everybody, fuck, I haven't seen any of you in eight years."

Eddie inadvertently whimpers, and Bev cuts in with, "Richie, don't freak out. I know you're gonna freak out. You're in New York state. Some—" she catches Stan's eye and they share an uneasy glance, "*stuff's* been happening. What do you remember last?"

"*New York?*"

"The question, Rich."

He's captivated, looking around the living room with a wide-open mouth, fingers tapping an unreadable pattern onto the embroidery of the couch cover. "Well, shit. My apartment. LA. I had a hangover."

He pauses. “*Have* a hangover. How the *fuck* did I get here.” Then he freezes. “It’s not–”

“It’s not the clown,” Ben says quickly.

“Well, thank fucking god. Hey, just a side note, is it weird that getting your memories back *hurts*?”

And in that moment, Bev’s eyes flash white, and she hears– god, whose *voice* is that–

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## 0. Whitespace

There is a road that never ends.

Richie’s floating in a world that doesn’t exist. It’s almost like a cartoon, like a blank piece of paper– it’s just space, just blankness. A massive tar-stinking highway cuts straight through the vast expanse of bleach-white, like it’s the only thing that exists at all, anywhere, careening off towards a bare horizon. And that’s all he sees. Off the highway are exits, thousands of them, weed-like with spidering legs and not expressly labelled by signs. And he’s floating up above the road, frozen in fear.

And something rumbles.

Louder than loud, louder than worlds, it echoes wordlessly, like the roaring of wind, or maybe the screech of an elevator. Richie screws his eyes shut, his head pounds, and something hits him on the temple and bounces into his hands.

Wary, he opens one eye. It’s a book. A tiny one, barely the size of his palm, very un-special in dull green binding. Still floating above the ground and the road, he flips it open, but the pages are all blank. He doesn’t have the capacity to understand anything that’s happening, least of all whatever this is. Or whoever gave him this.

*What a day. What a fucking bad trip of a day.* He thumbs to the first page and squints. Still nothing. There's no source of light anywhere he can see, but it's still too bright. *What the fuck is going on.*

And then, it's like every stupid movie.

It feels like electricity, because of course it does. He seizes. Right in his belly, in his core, he really just feels an *energy*, which is so fucking dumb and contrived, but that's just what it *feels* like, radiating out into the rest of his body, it hurts, it's amazing, he can feel his blood cells turning blue. And it's like someone's sewing up the hole in his chest, like he's new again. Strung up like he's on the goddamn cross, arms thrown back, legs flailing from the shock and his spine curling outward, Richie Tozier registers in the back of his mind that this is kind of what happens when you get magic powers.

And then he understands, really.

He doesn't need the book, now covered in runes. Richie has *magic fucking powers*— but more than that, he blinks and suddenly he *gets it*. Time travel. Not in numbers, not in any way that's explainable, but, roll with him, he knows he can do it, he knows what the limits are, now. He knows the things that will wreck a timeline, what he can get away with, and most importantly he knows it won't last forever. Just a few more shots at this, just one more chance, one more life. But this time he's in control. He has to figure this out on his own. And he knows where to go.

*Nothing in this world will ever be fair.* Except it is, and things are bending for him, and nothing's unfixable, he just has to get a little creative. The world's holding his coat, now.

Naturally, he yells at the sky. "Hey, fuckhead!"

There's a rumble of response.

"You got any ideas on how to save them?"

There's nothing. But he expected that.

"Alright. Well. Fuck it. Might as well ask while I can. So why me? I mean, shit, you, uh, couldn't have made this kinda effort during the

fucking Holocaust? I mean, *the fucking Holocaust*, dude?”

*i slumbered*

“Oh, you slumbered. Through all of human history. Every bad thing.”

*untouchable event horizons*

“Okay, fine, fuck, but– why the hell are you helping *me*? Us? Why’d you wake up for *this*? You can’t think of *anyone* who might deserve this more? Because–”

*underestimation*

“–Like, what, so the six people per year that get crushed to death by vending machines don’t get magic powers to give themselves a second chance, and I do?”

*but you*

“But I *what*?”

*did everything right*

“Please stop with the riddles.”

*a house cannot burn itself down*

“Oh Jesus Christ.”

*outside interference with determinate conditions*

“Pennywise,” says Richie, sort of getting it, now. *As much as you can ‘get’ anything suspended in the air in an unending void while talking to, presumably, God, who is real, I guess, and more amoral than benevolent, really, and that’s just information that I have, now.* “He fucked up the natural order. And we did you a favour.”

*rethreading needles*

“Okay.” He takes a moment to breathe, and breathe again. “So– so what the fuck was the *point* of all that?” he shouts upward. “All that, in the past, with them. 2002. You could’ve just *told* me all of this.” He

thinks of that Eddie, how young he was, frown lines already forming. He thinks of that Beverly, her easy smile, the way they stole the road, that whole long week together. And Stan, smarter than anyone, and alive, and resolved to staying that way. “Why’d you make me go back at all? If you knew it would end like– like *this*?”

*to learn*

“Learn what? You know, I’m so fucking sick of learning, learn *what*?”

*you can never go back*

And then we pull out of the scene.

Richie smiles a private, sad smile and snaps his fingers and disappears into the light. And we keep pulling back, we see more and more of the never-ending highway, we see more of the world that doesn’t exist, further and further, back and back, stuck in the endless sprawl until we *finally* see the full picture: veins inching in crimson across a great eye, watching, waiting.

There is a road that never ends.

And here– a car swerving. The wrong exit, a cliffside, a u-turn.

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## I. 2017 – Chicago

The jump doesn’t make Richie feel like throwing up this time, so he feels like he can count this as a win.

He’s got ideas. He’s formulating... something. He’s not sure it’ll work, but there has to be a way to save Eddie and Stan and little Adrian without destroying the whole damn time-space continuum.

Timelines are structured largely by their important inciting events, but there are large swathes in deterministic flux, which is where he can operate. He’s actually pretty sure he can operate in *his own*

timeline, now, if he doesn't colossally fuck anything up, which is nice, so he doesn't have to worry about any parallel versions of himself.

He's still in his low-ceilinged shitty little apartment, but it doesn't seem so closed-in anymore. Something catches his eye— it's his hand, and it's glowing. He lifts his palm. Where the scar had been, there's now a shining circle, emanating white light in a ring. In all honesty, it's sort of pretty.

He doesn't know it yet, but somewhere in his neurons a switch has flipped, he's firing at all cylinders, he hasn't been able to consciously recognize it but fuck, in this moment, the world has been so big and so terrible and so massively *massively* unfair to him and yet— *and yet*—Richie Tozier wants to live. Not just a background survival instinct, not a sense of going through the motions on autopilot and vaguely musing that he probably shouldn't stay around much longer, but actively, thoughtfully, he wants to *be alive*.

How about that.

But first, business. He doesn't snap his fingers or anything stupid like that, doesn't need to jump completely— he's making moves without thinking now, he barely has to breathe to do it— he casts a shadow of himself across a shallow pond, all the way back to—

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## VII. 2002 – The House on Priddle Point Rd.

*RINGWALD!*

Christ, that's Richie's voice, older-sounding and loud as all hell, rocking around in her head. Which... is an *issue*, because another Richie is talking at the exact same time, blabbering on the couch like nothing's wrong.

“And I mean if I ever have to see Pennywise do his stupid fucking dance, do you guys remember—”



“Richie shut *up* for a second,” Bev says.

*What?*

“Fuck, no, I mean, not you.”

“Um, Bev?” Ben prods. “Your eyes are—”

*Is this a bad time?*

Stan says, “What the fuck is happening *now*.”

Bev loves her boys, but Jesus Christ. No tact at all. “One second, everyone.” She grits her teeth and gets up, and without another word locks herself in the first floor bathroom. “Okay, fuck. Continue.”

*Did I miss anything?*

“No. I mean, you woke up. Young you. He’s more annoying than you were. Did *I* miss anything?”

*I got magic powers.*

“Richie please don’t fuck with me right now. Where are you. Wait. How are you even *talking* to me? What happened?”

*Magic powers! Scout’s honour. I’m back in my timeline, and now I basically understand everything about time travel. No big whoop. I’m basically Dr. Strange but not butt-ugly.*

“I don’t know what that is but I believe you.”

*Uh, thanks. I guess.*

“Well... what are you gonna do?”

*Save my Eddie, I guess. I’ve only got a couple more shots at this, I think. From the bullshit I can gather. So I don’t think I’m coming back. You’re not my timeline anyway, it was never going to work. Temporally, I mean. As you gathered.*

He sounds so sad, and it tugs at Bev’s heart, too. “So what should we do?”

*Live? He laughs a little. Oh, right. Okay, so listen. Before I went, I wrote some stuff down. Useful stuff, news from the future. It's in my jacket pocket, in a notebook. It probably covers everything important. Probably. Okay, maybe not everything.*

“Well, aren't you a saint.”

*I do try. Listen, shit, I gotta go. Connections like this tend to get unstable quick.*

The sound's starting to distort. “Richie?” Bev says into the quiet, staring into the sink mirror, admiring the light that bounces from her eyes whenever she speaks.

*Yeah, Bev?*

“Good luck out there.”

*Hey— Bev.*

She manages a smile. “Yeah, Rich?”

*Thanks. For everything, and for the road.*

And he fizzles out. Her eyes fade back to green. Everything goes quiet. She thinks about Richie, and the sad, sad man he became, and the careless kid outside, and the lives she still has to protect from the future. It's been such a long fucking week. She leaves the bathroom.

“Richie,” she says, quietly. He's still on the couch, but all of the others are laughing at one of his jokes.

“Oh, shit, you took forever. Which... is suspicious, considering girls don't poop.”

She grins. “Jacket pocket.” He squints and feels around and brings out one of Bill's notebooks. Befuddled, he opens it to a folded, ink-stained page, and starts to read it out.

HEY, LOSERS

Richie here. Wow, this already sounds stupid as fuck. I guess if you're reading this, something fucked up with the time stream and I'm not there anymore. Maybe my younger self is there. Poor asshole. But hey, I like you guys, and I like this timeline, and I'm not just gonna leave you all out to sea. I wanna give you the information you need to... y'know, win. So:

## OPERATION NOBODY FUCKING DIES, 2.0

1. THIS ONE'S IMPORTANT – Here's how you beat Pennywise. Mike, I promise this isn't bullshit, would you please stop bothering the very nice people at the reservation. Okay, so you go down to the sewers, you corner him, and you MAKE FUN OF HIM UNTIL HE DIES. Not bullshitting you. You make him feel 'small', I guess. It sounds so fucking stupid but trust me it's the only thing that worked. I think I used the words "sloppy bitch" at some point(?) Do NOT attack with weapons, IT WILL GO BAD. Also do not take any drinks from Mike, they're FULL of rohypnol
2. Bev, hey. Thanks, by the way, for everything you told me. And everything you're going to tell me. Don't marry that rich guy from your grad class. Don't even look his way. Ben wrote the stupid poem, alright? I feel like that's something you should know. LOVE YOU
3. (At least read THIS one out loud, for the sake of accountability) BILL! DON'T CHEAT ON YOUR WIFE!
4. Oh yeah don't let Adrian Mellon go back to Derry
5. Stan, I'd take you on the spaceship too, if I could. You could take your girl with you to the barrens, in the future, if you think that would

make you feel more brave. None of us will mind.

6. Eds. Oh, what do I say here. Eds, I uh. Fuck I feel like I've been writing this in my head for forty years. I just wanted to say before anything that I'

"Well, I don't get it," Richie says, breaking the silence.

And Eddie smiles.

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## I. 2017 – Chicago

Richie's head is swimming.

*You can never go back.* Not to childhood, not to mistakes. *You can never go back.* It isn't like his life is over, now that he's forty, it isn't like he's dead and gone, it isn't like he doesn't still have time. *You can never go back.* And isn't that just it, then? The world stole his whole fucking life from under him, and they've still gotta answer for that, but fuck, he doesn't need young eyes, he doesn't need more years. There's only one thing that will help him feel whole. *You can never go back.*

And yet, there's so much of him that's still rotting. It's hard to see, he's been awake so long, the room is spinning. He takes another swig of beer, he doesn't want to drag himself up off the carpet. He's half-asleep, dreaming of plans, of road trips, of time and space and Eddie. He still has so much to do. He still has so much to do.

But he can't stop thinking about it. The barrens, the green of it, the overpowering clean smell of water. And the child with trembling hands. And the knife's blunt edge. Maybe he can't go back but he can't move forward either until he ties up his loose ends. Rethreading

needles. Three lights, swimming; the scenic view from highways. His hand is glowing. A lot of things are glowing.

So Richie gives way to the dream. Blinks and the world is green again, the world is the barrens, and his thirteen-year-old self is standing there across the water sopping wet, and sobbing, and the sun is slipping behind the trees. *To take back a life*, they say, with the rustling of their leaves. *Be brave*.

This time... this time Richie plunges into the water and swims over to the other side of the brook, pushing back the current, somehow feeling at once weightless and heavy as a stone, and when he pulls himself out he does not waste any time. Daylight in his eyes, rippling everywhere.

And there he is, thirteen and sunning, thirteen with red-rimmed eyes, thirteen and river-wet so the tears just look like rivulets, knife burning a hole in his pocket, rusted by time, and the names it remembers. And Richie takes his younger self by the shoulders and stares very deeply into his own big terrified eyes and says, "Hey."

The kid jumps out of his skin. "Jesus, fuck. Who the fuck are you. No no no, stranger danger, stop touching me."

"So it's gonna be like that, huh."

"I said, *who the fuck are you*." But he's smiling, wide-eyed and amazed. He knows. Of course, he knows.

"You, just. Okay. Hear me out. Just *hear me out*." Light fills the alcove, slipping off the stones.

"One day, someone is going to look at you like you're the whole world, Richie," says Richie. And the kid shuts up quick. "And— and he's gonna pick you, specifically he is going to *pick you* and give a shit about you, on purpose." An eerie, cool silence falls over the scene.

"One day, you're not gonna ever be afraid again, kid, not one more time in your life. And— and I know that sounds fucking insane, I know how confused and scared you are, and maybe you're gonna keep feeling that way, maybe it's going to take a long time. And, and

maybe you're gonna think you can ignore it, the hole in you. Yeah, that one. But it— well, it's not going away unless you face it. And you've got a lot of shit to face. More than you should. But some things you know. Already. In your heart, Rich." He thinks, madly, that he's starting to sound just like Bev. "Some things you already know well enough."

The kid is silent as a church mouse, but he doesn't look scared. The wind roars in tune with the river. Everything tumbling. Everything growing. Trees green as summer hills, leaves suckling, the colours of July all shimmering with the sort of heat that hugs you tight.

"I know, you think nobody in this stupid fucking world will ever want you," he continues. "Nobody, not your friends, not anybody, no one on the planet. But I," it's getting hard to speak, it's always been *so hard to speak*, "hey, man, *I* want you around," he tells himself, and they both laugh a little through the lumps in their throats, "And you think nobody's ever going to be able to sit you down and tell you they know where you're hurting. *I* know where you're hurting. I still hurt there. I just need you to know it's a fucking lie, that nobody's ever gonna care. Someone will. Okay, someone *will care*, you just have to let them. And shit, nobody's ever gonna *apologize*. This world's fucking awful, and none of those fuckers will ever know about the hurt you've got in you, the shit they really did to you, and they're never gonna say sorry. But it won't... it won't be there forever," he says, and in that moment he finds that it's true.

What fucking hole in him?

"And... you don't have to *forgive* that, not ever," the words are spilling out of him without agency now, "but you're allowed to give a shit about yourself, okay? I care about you! How about that, kid, how's that? I care about you on purpose, you fucking snot-nosed brat, I give *so much of a shit*."

He doesn't know if this will change anything, if it's not just a daydream, just a narratively symbolic tool his brain created to make himself feel better, because this isn't time travel so much as it's just fucking therapy, and hasn't this *all* been that, hasn't this whole stupid week just been that.

But he hugs him. Digs his face into that stupid oversized Hawaiian shirt and sobs into his own shoulder.

“This is really fucking weird,” says the kid, muffled, into his chest. “I’m gonna pretend this was a hallucination.”

“Yeah that’s probably. Wise.”

The sun winks warmly. And then Richie fades out, back to the apartment, where light is shining through the dusty windows and falling in perfect slices across his face where he’s lying on the floor, blinking himself awake.

He reckons it was probably a dream. But it was enough.

Across the room, his phone buzzes. His eyelids are sticking together and his tongue is desert-dry, but he manages to trudge over to the kitchen counter.

**BEV: [10:21:00]** You doin alright? Ben said you needed to talk last night, here if u need me :\*

**RICH: [10:22:11]** well

**RICH: [10:22:24]** kind of a funny story actually

**RICH: [10:22:40]** we can talk later though

**RICH: [10:23:09]** got some stuff to take care of first

He drinks three and a half glasses of water and sloshes the rest into his fern pot, and manages to eat some toast. He can’t seem to stop staring at the white circle marking his palm, crossing over his life line, cutting across his love line, skin all ridge-like with colourless scar tissue.

The test run, of course, is Stan.

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## -II. 2016 – Atlanta

The image of a bathtub, blood slicking tiles. Richie warps into Stanley Uris' bathroom while the lights are still off. He decides to hide behind the shower curtain, and crouches in the dark. He does not have a plan. Why the fuck would he have a plan? It isn't like anything about this entire week has made *sense*.

It's the night they all get the call. It's seven at night in Atlanta, Georgia. Stan is still alive, but probably not for long, he's probably shaking and running through his options and thinking about that goddamn clown. The lights flick on, and–

No, it's just his wife. Richie freezes. It's... well... alright, it's a long minute. She flushes, and turns the lights off again. He waits. He isn't sure how long has passed. Fifteen minutes, or maybe an hour.

Deterministic flux is a funny thing. Time travel is impossible, and stupid, but look– he's got magic powers. Event horizons can be tricked, Richie figures. As long as Stan leaves a note, and the letters, everyone will continue to assume he really did die, even without a body. He just has to think deterministically. The outcome will be the same, so the thread won't fray. Richie just has to get to him before–

The lights again. The sound of crying, heavy breathing, a panic attack. “Fuck, fuck, *fuck*, Mike. Fuck. *Fuck*.” Richie stands up in the bathtub, as quietly as he can, still hidden. “This can't be– god, *fuck*. Okay, fuck. I can't do this. I can't fucking do this.” Papers are rustling, he reckons Stan's still writing the letters. He breathes through his nose. It feels like an eternity.

Then Stan whisks open the shower curtain, and Richie doesn't have time to even think before he wraps his arms around him tight and clamps down over Stan's mouth with his glowing hand and blinks them forward, and forward, until–

“Wait, oh, *fuck*, you're naked.”

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## I. 2017 – Chicago

And, yeah, Stan is *totally* naked, and he's brandishing a knife in the middle of Richie's living room. And screaming.

"DON'T TOUCH ME, I HAVE A KNIFE," he shouts, eyes wild, and then his vision adjusts. He lowers the knife, his jaw dropping. He looks around. "What the– *fuck*– just– where am I–"

Richie's not looking at him, he's darting to his clean laundry pile, still unsorted in the basket. He throws a pair of boxers and a loose plaid shirt at Stan, who's starting to cower a little bit, hand hovering futilely over his groin area. "Shit, dude, I am *so* sorry. I did *not* want to see that. Okay, well, maybe I did want to see that but, yeah, *not* the fucking time."

"*Richie?*"

"At your service. Okay, deep breaths, buddy," he says as Stan pulls on the underwear. "You're okay. You're alive, everything's gonna be fine. You're... you're not in a good place right now, Stan."

"I don't know *where* I am right now. What the fuck just happened. What were you– you were in my bathroom– Richie," he pants with the fear of god in his eyes, "Richie, oh my god, the– the *clown*."

"Stan," says Richie, not unkindly, "you're gonna need to sit down for this one."

"Where the hell am I, Rich."

"Chicago," he murmurs. "Eight months in the future."

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Stan takes it all rather well, considering. He's still shaky, adrenaline still shooting through his body, but he at least understands the

logistics as well as anyone realistically could.

“And then you...”

They're both sitting on the couch, Stan cradling a mug of tea, Richie fiddling with the tassels on his throw pillow. “We killed it, yeah. For good.” He swallows. “And, uh. And Eddie died. You know, in the process.”

“Oh, god.” Stan lowers his gaze. “Oh, Richie, I'm so sorry.”

“It's okay.”

“Is it?”

Richie smiles slightly. “You're my best friend, you know that?”

Stan tilts his head. “Richie, we haven't talked in twenty-seven years.” Houseplants rustle softly, sweetly. “Oh my god, you really don't have other friends.”

“I brought you back, Stan,” Richie says, breaking into a grin. “And it was really fucking hard, but I figured it out. Something smiled on me, man. The world held my coat.”

“Did you... just misquote Kafka to me?”

Richie ignores him. “And I'm gonna bring back Eddie, too. If you'll give me a sec.” He hands his phone to Stan. “Now, I think there's someone you need to talk to about not being dead anymore.”

It'll be harder. No way to spirit Eddie away unharmed without being in plain view of the others. No way to stop the clown quickly without screwing with the timeline. He'd have to zap in after everyone else crawled out, while the cavern was in the process of collapsing– and after Eddie had already stopped breathing. He remembers the lessening warmth of the body, the stillness of his hands, eyelids refusing to flutter. Eddie had already been gone by the time they'd left him. If he'd have been breathing, if his heart was still beating Richie would have *known*, they would've gotten him out of that stinking wet place if he had to claw Ben's fucking eyes out to do it. Eddie had died in his arms. For him. That much is still true.

He has to try anyway.

Stan's on the phone with Patty– Richie finally knows her name– and the sun is high in the sky, and it's February and he's breathing in deep, and Eddie Kaspbrack is almost, almost alive. He glances quickly at his palm. He smiles. He crosses his fingers.

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## **-I. 2016 – Neibolt**

And then he's in this cavern.

Christ, it's so much worse than he ever remembered. Green light, spilling. The ground shaking and splitting underfoot. Thick air, less muggy and more *liquid*, time slow, dust and rubble.

Faraway, at this moment, he's getting dragged away by Ben, strong arms heavy around him, he's scrabbling and grasping for something dead. Faraway, the losers are clambering up to the water, up to the air, Beverly is making kind, soft noises and he's screaming out things he didn't know he even had the capacity to say with his mouth, he's babbling things, tears cutting highways through the grime of his face; faraway, they're all reaching for life.

Richie's in the cavern. The sky is falling, black with gloom, the only light is coming from his hand, skittering dimly off the rough slate. It smells like a body. It smells like dark. It's all slick with wet, with sewer water, rivulets gushing from the ceiling. Everything's caving in, and he's rooted to the ground, it's so much worse than he ever remembered. It's so loud. He lets go of his breath. He didn't even think to bring a knife, or something, or, fuck, a bike helmet, bandages, or anything. But– but god damn it, Eddie's right there.

Right there. Nestled, almost child-like. Head against the rock, eyes of glass. Broken. Hole split through him, face still bearing bandages, he isn't looking at anything. Right there, and he's certainly dead, and Richie staggers across the uneven ground, and he's steadying himself

on the stone, and the whole place shudders violently and he falls on his knees and *crawls*, there, gravel spitting against his forehead, blood and brown and river water, light still swallowing itself, three lights, swimming, and a gash opens through his jeans and his knuckles are scraping and yet, somehow, he reaches him. He grabs for Eddie's hand, bone cold, it feels *wrong*, like cavity gums, like it's his own numb skin but the pain receptors have fizzled, he threads their fingers and he's back right where he was, he's taken his own place gripping Eddie's body like it's all he can do to grab tight, and nothing's pulling him away now but the roaring crumpling sky, and he cries. Puts his forehead to Eddie's and weeps, shakes, he's too late but at least he can make sure the body doesn't rot, here, down where it was never meant to lie.

"You asshole," he breathes into Eddie's ear, pulling him close, tight, "you fucking *asshole*." He takes a sharp painful breath and yanks off his overshirt, pressing it to the hole in his chest where the blood has already crusted. The world quakes, everything's eating itself. "Come on, come on, this one thing, this one fucking thing." He pumps at Eddie's chest, one, two, three. One, two, three.

Eddie's lips are dry and brittle. Richie's heart seizes, he's back in the movie from his nightmares but he never got this far, the body, he's holding the body and it's too late, but fuck, he has to do *something*. One, two, three. It would be cruel, to kiss him after he's already dead, but— but Eddie's come back from death before. Wasps in the field, blind sunlight and Derry General, and Bill's fireman's carry. One, two, three, and Richie breathes into Eddie's mouth, *this doesn't count as a first kiss, asshole, if you haunt me for this I'll send you right back*, one, two, three, and then he registers that his hand is glowing brighter, and brighter, light fracturing everywhere, one, two, three, both hands on Eddie's chest, now, right over the hole in him, he breathes into him again, one, two—

Light. Everywhere, light. Light travelling, leeching from Richie and sinking just below Eddie's skin, light like lightning pulsing up his chest, pulsing through his body, veins and blood cells and everything glowing, rippling out, and Richie's just spellbound, staring at a ruined body become beautiful, foreheads pressed together, feeling an incredible warmth though they're soaked to the bone, the light

reaches Eddie's collarbone, it trickles down his arms, phosphorescent, jellyfish blue, it's swimming up his neck and down to his legs, one, two, three.

The sound goes out. The world slows to a stop. Rubble caught in the air. The two of them trembling. And something dislodges. Something snaps. They both take a long, quivering breath.

Eddie's eyelashes flutter. He blinks out dust. He tries to speak but nothing comes.

"Eds." Richie's crying even more now, he hugs him close, the glow fading, still rippling from his hand and through to Eddie's heart, they're clutching each other so tight it seems like they share one body. "Eds, Eds, Eds." A whimper, Eddie swallows the dirt in his throat. "It's okay. You're okay, you're okay, we're going to be okay."

"I was brave, Rich," Eddie chokes out, near-silent, in a wheeze. Blood on his lips, on Richie's, too, but he's smiling. He can't see, he's lost too much blood, but he's smiling. "I tried to be brave."

Through tears, both of them scared to breathe, Richie grabs Eddie by the cheeks, they're cradled in each other there where the world is ending, where fungi grows in cracks and nobody is buried. And they're looking at each other, eyes clear and bright, they're alive, they're so alive, and they're not sure who moved first but they're kissing, so afraid they're nearly shedding their skins, they're in the cavern dogged by blue shadows, and they're flying up, they're swimming with deadlights, and they're in a Chicago apartment, they're in a townhouse in New York City, they're in the barrens on the pebbled shore of a clear green river, and they're at home in whitespace and they're kissing in colours, and their hands are shooting out light, the holes in them are filling in by-the-numbers, bodies splitting at inseams and rethreading together, and they're in the sea, they're out to sea, they're swimming.

Eddie's eyes are glowing white.

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## VIII. 2017 – Derry General Hospital

And Eddie croaks, “Oh, you taste like *sewer shit*.”

They’re on the floor of the hospital seeping blood everywhere, fluorescence blinding, clean and alive. They’re in a corridor, up against a grey wall, no one’s around, it’s 2017, Eddie heaves and coughs up blood and manages a dreaming smile.

And then he faints.

“NURSE!” Richie’s scrambling up, his hands are shaking, every part of him is shaking, he can’t quite believe it but he can’t slow down now, go through the movements, just get this one day right; he kneels back to Eddie, slapping at his cheeks, “Come on, Eds, come on, stay with me, just fucking stay with me we’re gonna get you some help just please please stay here, just stay, just stay. NURSE, CAN I GET A NURSE, HE’S HURT, HE’S–” He allows himself quick breaths, his head is swimming. “WE NEED HELP.”

Someone skids into the hallway, clad in blue scrubs and wheeling along a gurney. “Oh, *shit*,” she says, kind face lined by worry, and she kneels and starts to pull Eddie up onto the stretcher. Richie helps, careful as he can. “What happened to him? Are you–?”

Richie’s mind goes blank. “I’m okay. I’m– I’m okay. He’s been stabbed.” Eddie’s eyelids scrunch and he starts moaning quietly. “He’s been... missing. He’s– wait, we’re in Derry, right?”

She starts pushing Eddie down the hall, and Richie follows on unsteady feet. “Of course we’re in Derry, sir.” She stops dead in her tracks. “No. This isn’t...”

“That’s Eddie Kapsbrack,” Richie says quietly, “yeah. I found him.”

“Holy shit.” She tilts her head. “Hey. Hey, wait. Haven’t I seen you–”

He puts his hand on the metal of the gurney, and his hand finds Eddie’s. “*Talk later*. Please can we fucking talk about this later.” She nods and keeps wheeling, and they find their way into an empty

operating room, and while she grabs a doctor, Eddie's eyes open again.

"Shh, shh," says Richie, "You're gonna be okay, dipshit, just shut up until they've cleaned out all the hepatitis from your idiot chest wound."

"Beep beep."

"Beep beep," he agrees.

"I was going to tell you," Eddie murmurs under his breath. Everything stills. Richie can't articulate feelings, everything's just happening so fast, but his heart slows, he's teetering on the edge of a precipice. "Before..."

"You told me a terrible joke," Richie can feel a tear dripping down his cheek, "you piece of shit, and then you died."

"I had more things. To say."

Richie smiles a crinkly smile. "Could've said them."

"Couldn't... breathe right."

"Shouldn't have burnt your inhaler."

"Shouldn't have done... a lot of things."

"Eddie," he says, and he doesn't want to joke around this anymore, doesn't want to hide this, how could he, now? "Eddie, I love you."

But he's gone again, eyes glued shut, and there's a surgeon cracking open the door and politely asking Richie to stay outside while they operate, apparently there's shrapnel stuck somewhere, it's going to take a while, and are you family? Do you know his family?

"I'm his," Richie says in the doorway, and then he finds he doesn't know what he is. Nothing's coming, his throat is dry, his, his, nothing escapes but, "*lover*."

The surgeon's eyes are kind, but the door closes, and Richie goes to

stand at the waiting room payphone, and calls Myra to tell her the good news.

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## **IX. 2017 – Chicago**

“So, you cry during sex often?”

“Oh, you didn’t hear? No, I have this rare medical condition where all my jizz leaks out of my eyes instead of my dong. Yeah it’s a whole thing with my tear ducts. Y’know I’m surprised you never heard of it, you’ve got a bad case of practically every other fucking thing already.”

“You are *so gross*.”

Everything rethreads. Life knits itself back together, slowly. Carefully.

It takes a very long time, months and months, but things start to make sense again. Myra gets the townhouse in the divorce. Fine by Richie. He just has to rearrange the furniture for the wheelchair, and maybe buy a bed that isn’t twin sized.

His plants have never been more green, Eddie’s got a whole watering schedule pinned to the fridge and everything. Life breathes deeply, they begin to build back from scratch, and Richie takes his last trip back in time.

But that’s a story for another day.

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## **IX. 2017 – Mayfield’s Sole IHOP**



"But what about," says Mike through a mouthful of scrambled eggs, "like, slavery?"

"You mean—"

"Why couldn't he— whatever he is— intervene in times of massive atrocities," Bill cuts in. "If he could just give anyone time travel abilities. Why not prevent all the big, horrible things, y'know, if he's some benevolent presence."

It's July. The losers are in Mayfield, New York, the beginning of an annual tradition where they all pile into Bill's aunt's ramshackle house for a week in the summer to reconnect and watch the lake and take a long, sweet breath. They're eating breakfast and talking metaphysics and everyone is still alive. And it's really, really nice.

Richie swallows his bite of pancake. They're grilling him about time travel again. "Just said he was 'sleeping'."

"Bullshit, *god was sleeping*," Stan snaps.

"Well, what do you know about god?"

"*My father was a fucking rabbi*, Richard."

"It just sort of felt, like," Richie is so not equipped to talk about this, like, at all, "Like he wasn't in *control* of everybody's lives. Like he just... houses us, I guess. Like we're all living on his back."

"What, like a turtle," Eddie laughs. "Like— god's a fucking *turtle*? Rich. You know you are such a fucking nutcase. You know that, right."

"I mean, I didn't *see* him."

Bev elbows Richie. "Do you need to gender god?"

"And anyway," Richie interrupts, "he, like, created the *conditions* of the world, or something, and we all decide our own fate from there. Largely, I mean, as a species. Or universe. Like we're a terrarium. He can't intervene."

Ben groans, but a smile is tugging at his cheeks. “That doesn’t make *any* sense.”

“But why,” asks Mike, “save *you*? I mean, no offence.” Stan and Eddie share a look. “Just, y’know. It’s just... two guys, from a utilitarian perspective. Why break all the rules of the universe for that?”

“So that’s the thing,” Richie explains. “Basically, if *it* never interfered, you two would have lived. Cosmically, things were off-balance, the control variables or fuckin’ whatever had to be fixed, that stupid clown was tampering. And since we were the ones who defeated it, I guess god wanted to do us a favour, or something, for helping out.”

“Make right what *it* had done to us?” Stan finishes.

“Basically.” Lined by the glow of daylight through the doors, Adrian walks into the diner, Don on his arm. Richie winks at him, and he beams back. Nobody notices.

Eddie squints, and rolls an inch back in his wheelchair. “That is so fucking dumb. I mean I’ve heard Richie explain it like three hundred times but holy fuck.”

“Sounds like one of your endings, Bill,” Ben says, and the table laughs.

“Hey!”

“Yeah, that’s just lazy writing.” Bev grins. “All’s well that ends well, though, right?”

Richie chuckles to himself. The sun turns in its cornflower bed and glares through the window, basking them all in orange light. “Don’t be lame.”

“Feelings *aren’t* lame.”

“So defensive, Bill!”

It all feels so still. Everything, all of it.

Like, as if life has really *always* been like this.

## Notes for the Chapter:

POSTSCRIPT: Hello. First of all, I am so so so stupidly sorry about how long this took. I very suddenly lost faith in my ability to wrap this up at all in a satisfying way (I never fully plan out anything, as you can probably tell), and even seriously considered scrapping the story entirely, and possibly rewriting it from scratch. However, I kept thinking about it through the month it took for me to go back to writing, and after a long long time, figured something out that I now feel pretty proud of. Thanks for your kind comments, and I'm very glad I actually finished this, because it was kinda touch and go for a second there! Sorry again.

For a little bit of context, maybe: originally, it was going to end very simply, and future-Eddie was going to get transported into past-Eddie's body, so that he and Richie could get their youth back and be happy together from 2002 onwards. But... man, it didn't sit right. I kept thinking about past-Richie and past-Eddie, and how their existences would just end. And future-Richie's body would be a dead shell in an apartment, and poor future-Bev and future-Ben would lose their friend. So that wouldn't work at all. (Of course, anything to do with parallel timelines starts to be weird, morally, but I can't go that far.) And tbh it was so horrible of me to assume that Richie and Eddie needed to be young to feel whole, that life after the age of twenty seven ceases to matter in the same way—when that wasn't their issue at all. They still have very long and fulfilling lives ahead, at forty, beginning from 2017. They still have more than enough time. Of course the loss of a happy youth is sad and warrants exploration, but it was never about that, it was just about them needing to be together, and to be alive at all. Very silly of me. So you can see how the ending would require an extensive and incredibly complicated rewrite that

probably doesn't make a lot of logistical sense. But I hope it was satisfying anyway. [extremely youtuber voice] Please let me know what you thought in the comments belooooowwww~

You can find me on Tumblr at ofmissing, where I am very stupid and funny and talk about haiku too much. Chapter title is from I Want To Be Well by Sufjan Stevens. Much, much love.